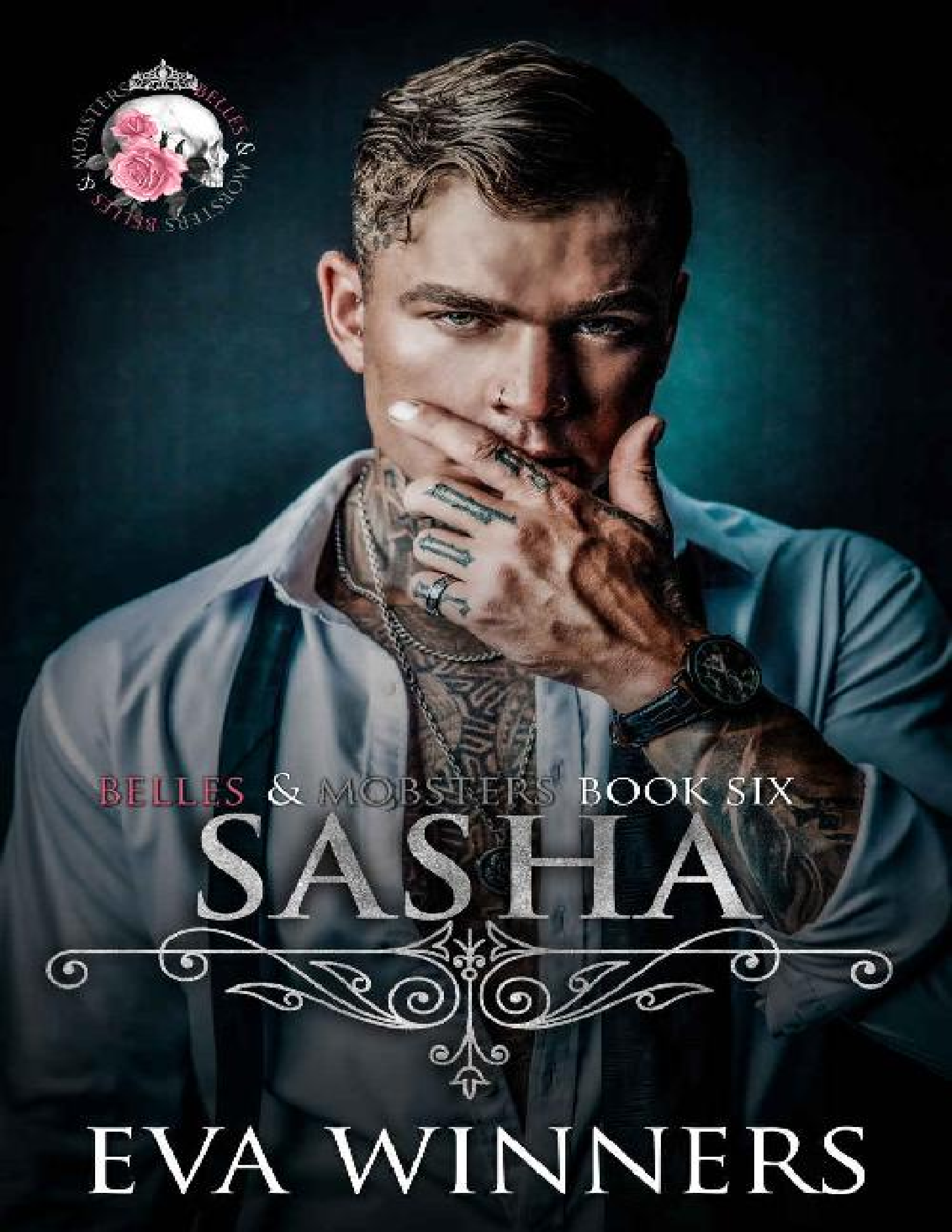
BELLES & MOBSTERS
BELLES & MOBSTERS BOOK SIX
SASHA
EVA WINNERS

SASHA

Belles & Mobsters Series Collection

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Acknowledgments

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To every single one of you who believed in me.
I wouldn't be here without you.

Thank you!

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BELLES & MOBSTERS SERIES COLLECTION

Each book in Belles & Mobster series can be read as a standalone.

If you'd like a preview to the Belles and Mobsters Book Seven make sure to keep reading and check out the prologue to Luca.

Enjoy!

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PROLOGUE

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Sasha

"Are you out of your goddamned mind?"

Vasili slammed his office door. To say my brother was pissed was the understatement of the century. The fucking glass of the building rattled from the slamming door or quite possibly from the force of his voice.

No matter. What's done is done; it was time to move on.

"Do you realize the whole goddamned world watched you kidnap that woman?" he bellowed. "It was fucking televised."

"Hmm, was it?" I snickered. "I would have never guessed from all the news vans out front."

"What in the fucking hell were you thinking, Sasha?" he roared. "Do you know how many fucking assholes I'll have to bribe for this shit?"

I shrugged my shoulders. He didn't have to bribe anyone. I was capable of settling my own scores.

Sitting behind the desk of Vasili's office, I leaned back into the chair and propped up my legs on the table. I picked up the *People* magazine Vasili had on his desk. My fucking brother always had that fucking magazine on his desk, but I had yet to see him read it.

"Put the fucking magazine down," he said through gritted teeth.

"Relax, Brother," I told him. "The bride in distress is safe and sound."

For the most part, I added silently, snickering to myself.

I left her tied to my bed - gloriously naked and sexually frustrated.

Unfortunately, my plan backfired a bit because I'd been going around with a hard dick that refused to get the message that we weren't fucking anyone today.

“For fuck’s sake, Sasha,” Vasili hissed, barely keeping a rein on his temper. I could see it in the vein throbbing in his neck. The one that his wife couldn’t seem to get enough of because I caught her licking it on more than one occasion. Fucking horny rabbits. Only Isabella found my brother attractive. “Are you trying to start a war? First, the whole goddamned thing with Wynter and keeping her away from Liam Brennan. Now this fucking shit!”

And there it was. I was waiting for the moment when he’d bring that up. He and everyone else could go fuck themselves. Wynter, the ice skating princess, needed me, and I would never leave her hanging.

I opened the drawer of Vasili’s desk that I’d taken over and found a piece of bubblegum. The crinkle of the wrapper filled the space, probably grating on Vasili’s nerves, egging him on.

“You said you wanted to see me married,” I drawled lazily, ignoring his jab about Wynter. “So I had to find a bride.”

“I said find a bride, not kidnap one,” he roared.

“Semantics.”

I swore Vasili’s blond hair, so much like mine, almost turned red with rage. And I fucking relished in it.

I threw the gum into my mouth and started chewing. I popped the gum, watching with delight as Vasili’s jaw ticked. He was fucking pissed. No surprise there. I didn’t particularly care for chewing gum, but it was such a goddamned thrill to see the pissed off expressions on people’s faces when I popped it.

So just for good measure, I blew a bubble, waited for it to get a decent size, and popped it again.

Our eyes locked in a battle of wills. The freaky blue eyes we shared stared back at me, probably contemplating my murder. I bet my brother fought the urge to reach across his desk and choke the life out of me. He wanted to so fucking badly, but he’d never hear the end of it from his wife.

It was good to have friends in high places.

The door to his office opened and my sister, Tatiana, strode in wearing a black dress. It had been a year and she still insisted on mourning.

“So I hear you’re starting a war,” she announced. “Can I join in?”

Our family was definitely a different shade of crazy.

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Chapter One

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BRANKA

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Seven Years Ago

Men are idiots.

There was nothing more to be said. They were simple-minded assholes that either used their physical strength to overpower women or destroy them.

The crowded bar, right outside Berkeley, held half of the students of the University of California - Berkeley. Except for my best friend, much to my dismay. She was being responsible. I wasn't.

Thursday night half-off specials drew in crowds and I couldn't resist. Loud music, loud people. Laughter. I loved the atmosphere, except when assholes that didn't know the meaning of 'no' insisted on nagging me.

"Leave the girl alone," one of my classmates laughed. Rebecca was her name. Simple. Happy. Nothing dark in her past and probably not in her future. She was a good person. "Can't you see she's not interested."

She winked at me and I smiled gratefully. Maybe my best friend had a point. Being surrounded by drunken, horny college guys was a bit too much on a Thursday night. I was starting to regret not staying home and studying. Or at least watching a movie while Autumn studied.

"Give me your number," the frat boy repeated.

My eyes roamed over him. An ugly baseball hat. Red and white checkered t-shirt. And pants that threatened to fall off his hips.

"No."

I didn't even bother offering him a smile. The guy was a fucking moron. And rude. I saw him grab a girl's ass as he walked over here. The way he strutted like a fucking peacock, you'd think he was a hotshot. Something worth looking at.

“I’ll take you out to dinner.”

“Really?” I feigned excitement. “Well in that case… still, no.”

I heard a few snickers around, but I didn’t bother acknowledging them. Nor him. This asshole and his attitude aside, I didn’t exactly react and function like most normal girls. I tried, but my father broke me even before my adolescent years. So now the goal was to act normal, overcome the fear of being touched, and enjoy my college years just like any other girl.

Turning around, my eyes traveled over the room. A bunch of familiar faces from campus. And a bunch of unfamiliar ones.

After we flunked the first semester, Autumn took her studies more seriously. I did too, starting first thing tomorrow. Tonight, I wanted to have some fun.

I looked around again, feeling the tiny hairs on the back of my neck stand up. My heart rate picked up and a chill swept over my body. Except, I didn’t know why. I didn’t see anyone looking my way. Except this conceited asshole. But he wasn’t the one that caused this reaction.

“I like you.” I blinked. The red baseball prick was still here. “I have money.”

“You’ve got to be out of your goddamned mind,” I sputtered.

This was exactly the kind of man that I disliked. The kind of man that left a bad taste in your mouth. Kind of like my father to my mother.

The sounds of a commotion and voices had both of us turning our heads in its direction, drawing our attention. My eyes widened the moment I saw him. *Trouble.* That was the first word that came to my mind. Second, that he was dangerous.

And not because he wore a leather jacket and jeans hugging his muscular thighs. He moved with grace, contrary to his muscular, bulky frame. He had this energy about him, the kind that was lethal and predatory. He stalked in a sensual kind of way, his six foot three inches reeking of authority and confidence.

He looked like he could have been an MMA fighter, drawing the attention of everyone as he walked.

Hard jawline. Nose ring. Eyes the palest blue I had ever seen. Something about him had me captivated, staring at him. Our eyes connected and the air swished out of my lungs. His icy eyes stared right at me in a way that rattled my nerves.

I fought a shiver that threatened to roll down my spine. This reaction was unusual. Puzzling. I couldn't quite distinguish whether the reaction was because I was scared of him or liked him.

Scared. Definitely scared.

Anyone with an ounce of sense would know to keep their distance from this guy. He screamed danger and ruthlessness.

The sounds of music and chatter faded as I drowned in his gaze. *Invasive. Blue. Electrifying.*

He was scary as shit but startlingly beautiful. But someone you should only admire from afar. Like a cobra. Why would you ever want to get close to a cobra?

Yet, I wanted to see him up-close. To study those tattoos that covered his exposed skin from his jawline down up close. Like really up close, I snickered silently.

Unless you panic, my mind mocked but I ignored the reason and focused on the beautiful specimen.

Jesus Christ.

He was tatted to high-heaven and although I never much cared for ink, he had me swooning. If his neck was anything to go by, he must have them all over his body. His hand came to his mouth and my eyes latched on to the ink on his fingers. *Symbols*.

I had never seen such beautiful fingers. Or strong.

My body jerked and my head snapped to my left. The fucking baseball cap guy was still here and he grabbed my arm, pulling me to himself.

A shudder of disgust made its way across my body. Sickening. Nauseous. Repulsive. Like thousands of spiders crawling over my skin. It was a result of my father’s treatment during the worst two years of my life. A stranger’s touch was usually unwelcomed.

“Did you just—” I hissed, pissed off that he put his hand on me. I tugged my hand out of his grip. “In case you’re still clueless and haven’t gotten the message… I. Am. Not. Interested.” When he remained standing in the same spot, I spat, “Why are you still here?”

He stared at me confused, as if he had never been rejected before. Surely that couldn’t be. He certainly wasn’t all that.

“There you are, kotyonok.” A deep, unfamiliar voice had me turning my head. A small gasp filled the air. *Mine.* Why did that stupid word suddenly

come to mind? I stared at the pale blue eyes, up close and personal. They were even more unusual up close. “Where is my kiss?”

I watched mesmerized as his hand wrapped around my waist, pulling me to him like a ragdoll, his strength apparent in that simple move. In the back of my mind, the fact that he touched me and I hadn’t freaked out registered.

Improvement, I thought, satisfied with myself.

He was taller than I originally thought. My palm came to his chest, holding on for balance, as I craned my neck to meet his gaze.

He was much taller than me. And realization finally settled in.

“Is this moron bothering you?” he asked, flicking a glance to the guy next to me. A dark warning lurked in that pale gaze.

He’s trying to save me from the moron next to me. Yes, I was a bit slow, but he was to blame.

Our eyes locked and I swallowed, hoping I wasn’t reading him wrong. My lips curved into a smile. I licked my lips, then rose up on my tiptoes.

“Hey, babe,” I purred, running my palm up and down his chest. The moment those words left my lips, his hand on my hip tightened and pulled me harder against his solid body. His head dipped while I watched, mesmerized as his lips inched closer and closer to mine.

When his lips covered mine, he wasted no time. He swept his tongue inside my mouth, wet and lazy. A moan bubbled in my throat. He tasted better than anything. *Addictive*. His hand left my waist and gripped my neck, angling it so he could deepen the kiss. Another sweep of his tongue, so deliciously sinful, and I let out a soft moan into his mouth.

Carnal need washed over me.

I had never tolerated physical closeness with strangers very well, but at this moment, I needed him to do that over and over again. A shiver ghosted down my spine and my body shuddered, pressed against his. My breathing shallowed and my nipples hardened.

His kiss lit embers that waited to be stoked into a full blown inferno. Just as abruptly as the kiss started, it ended.

He lifted his mouth from mine, his pale eyes staring down at me. His gaze never wavered from me as he stated his next words.

“Lay a hand on her… No, say a word to her or even look her way,” he stated coldly, “And I will end you.” He smiled. Harshly. Something unhinged lurking in his eyes. Although he still stared at me, I knew that was

for the guy that was harassing me. “And trust me when I say, it is not the quick kind of ending.”

The guy disappeared faster than a dog with a bone.

He looked to my left. “He’s gone.” His voice was like velvet on naked skin. His hands dropped from my body and a strange kind of ache lingered in its wake. Confusion and desire warred within me.

“Thank you,” I said, staring at him.

“Anytime.”

The entire room faded in the background as I drowned in those eyes. I searched for a comparison in my mind for them, but couldn’t quite come up with one. They were paler than blue skies. Paler than Arctic waters, reflecting the sunlight.

And while a harshness resided in them, I thought I saw something else in them too. Though I couldn’t quite figure out what.

I blinked, my whole body buzzing with a worrisome energy, urging me to lean back into him and soak in his warmth. His fucking sex appeal. Something.

I looked up at him, nodded, and turned around to go search out the group I had come with. They had all disappeared on me.

“Your friends asked me to give you this.” The bartender, in her thirties, handed me a piece of paper.

I skimmed through it, the letter dancing in front of my eyes and with each further word read, frustration grew thicker in my throat. *Assholes*. College kids had zero loyalties when it came to hanging out. They’d ditch you without a second thought if they had something better going on. It was the reason I always hung out with Autumn. She never left anyone behind.

Shaking my head, I headed for the exit as I pulled out my phone and booked an Uber, all the while muttering creative curses under my breath.

“Someone got you mad, kotyonok?” An amused voice came from behind me, and I twirled around to come face-to-face with the gorgeous stranger who had just kissed my brains out. He stood near the doors, leaning against the wall with his hands in his pockets.

His shirt hugged his broad shoulders, the custom tailored material making him almost appear like a gentleman. *Almost.* You just had to look into his eyes to know it was all a facade. He didn’t even bother hiding his savageness.

“Are you stalking me?” I answered with my own question.

He scratched the scruff on his jaw, my eyes latching onto his fingers again. Suddenly, my mouth went dry and my tongue swept over my bottom lip, wetting it.

“What would you do if I was?” I blinked, our gazes connecting again. My brain was scattered into incoherent thoughts around this man. Then I remembered our conversation. Not that it was much of one. Answering questions with another question.

“I’d tell my brother to kick your fucking ass,” I grumbled.

He threw his head back and laughed. He actually laughed. “What?” he challenged. “You wouldn’t kick my ass yourself, kotyonok?” I rolled my eyes. “You’ve got claws. You're a fighter after all.”

I sighed. “Listen, I don’t have time for riddles. Thank you for assisting earlier, but I’m afraid your services are no longer– ”

His hand came to my face, cupping it, and for such a big guy, the touch was surprisingly gentle. His rough palm burned my cheek, and my words caught in my throat.

“Do you need a ride?” *Fuck, yeah*. My mind screamed, eager for more of that feeling his lips offered. As if he read my mind, he smirked. “A ride home,” he clarified.

Disappointment washed over me, and I immediately scolded myself. He was a stranger. It wasn’t as if I wanted anything to do with him.

“I’m good, thank you,” I retorted dryly. “I booked an Uber.”

A sardonic breath left him. “If you get into that Uber, he’s a dead man,” he replied in a bored tone. A sharp breath escaped me. He couldn’t be serious. *Could he?* “Haven’t you been reading the news?” My brows scrunched. “Shit always happens to pretty girls when they ride alone in cabs.”

When I said nothing, he shook his head and stepped toward a beautiful black Ducati Desmosedici. Two helmets sat on the seat.

I glanced down at my outfit. I wore a short red dress and matching heels. Not exactly an outfit for riding a bike.

He followed my gaze and his lips curved up. “Not to worry. I’ll let nobody see it,” he mused.

“See what?” The words left before I thought better of it.

A smirk marked his face. “Your-” A pause followed and butterflies on fire fluttered through my body. “-panties.”

I'd stake my life that he was actually thinking a completely different word.

He straddled his bike and my thighs clenched as images flashed in my mind. This man straddling me with his muscular thighs. Then thrusting into me. My palm came to my heated cheek.

God, what was wrong with me? Maybe the alcohol was making me act all crazy. But I barely had half a glass of gin.

He slid his helmet on before handing me the spare, and with hesitant fingers, I reached for it.

I shifted nervously on my feet. "I've never been on a motorcycle before." I glanced down to my feet. "Should I take off my heels?"

He pulled me over. "Straddle me. Leave the heels on."

The smirk on his face promised something so dirty and delicious, igniting a fire through my veins.

With unsure legs, I followed his direction. My hands came to rest on his shoulders, steadying myself and straddling him from behind. My dress immediately hiked up and he slid a hand up the outside of my thigh. My skin instantly lit up, the buzzing spreading to the tips of my toes. And the throbbing between my thighs intensified.

"So I'm sharing a first with you?" I could hear the satisfied grin in his voice.

"Don't get all excited," I muttered and his laugh vibrated through his back and into my chest. "What's your name?"

I had no idea what made me ask. I figured if I was straddling him from behind, I should at least know his name. "*Moye Serdtse*."

"What kind of name is that?" My hands slid inside his leather jacket and squeezed tight. "Are you Russian?"

Tension entered his shoulders but it was gone the next moment.

"Is that a problem?" he asked in a nonchalant tone, but there was a hint of something raw in his voice. He revved the engine on the bike.

"No. Should it be?" I wasn't sure if he heard me or not.

"Hold on tight!" he yelled and I gripped him around his waist for dear life. His ab muscles tightened under my hands and even through the helmet, I swore I could smell his cologne. A mixture of citrus and leather.

I had never smelled anything so intoxicating, and I knew at that moment.

He'd taste like heaven and sin, all wrapped up in one.

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Chapter Two

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SASHA

The smile on my face felt genuine.

Not sadistic. Not sarcastic. Fucking genuine.

It should have been my first clue. I ignored it. Second clue, the strain in my pants. I never got hard from just looking at a woman. She was so damn beautiful that it almost hurt to look at her.

She fixed those deep gray eyes on me, and it was like a punch to the gut. My world spun as I watched her cheeks flush and spread down her neck, and reluctantly I pictured whether her ass would redden with the same color.

The moment her soft mouth molded into mine, the world stopped spinning and one word came to mind. *Mine.* That should have been my final clue. I should have ended the kiss. Or maybe set the world on fire right then and there, then saved myself years of headaches.

But I didn't. Hindsight was a bitch.

The woman had bewitched me. I pulled the bike in front of the Berkeley dorm. Branka Russo. I had kept tabs on her since Mia's death. My promise to keep. I knew Branka's grades, address, bars she frequented, favorite dish, her favorite color, her favorite song. I checked on her social platforms to ensure nobody was bullying her, checked her Pinterest to see what she liked. Overboard, yes. But it was the least I could do after failing Mia.

The moment I turned off my motorcycle, she released her tight grip on me and I regretted not taking the long way here.

A very long, roundabout way.

I helped her off the bike. “Thank you for the ride,” she retorted, her tone sassy and suggestive.

“Don’t play with fire, kotyonok,” I warned, fighting the strain in my pants. I couldn’t quite decide whether she was a kitten or a tigress. Either way, the nickname suited her. She had claws.

She rubbed her jaw, pensively as if she considered my words but the way her eyes shone with a challenge betrayed her.

“*Moye Serdtse,*” she started sweetly, although she butchered the pronunciation. *My heart.* The corner of my lips tugged up. I couldn’t give her my name and risk her recognizing it. But I’d have her call me her heart for this short while. “Playing with fire is my hobby.”

She strutted away from me and the strain in my pants demanded I go after her.

I didn’t.

Because I recognized the little girl. Fuck, she looked just like her older sister. A reminder of another failure.

Branka Russo was a mirror image of her older sister. I still remembered Mia’s battered face from that day. I’d gotten back to the barracks to find men with their hands on her. Grabbing her. Ripping her uniform.

Against her will.

I lost my shit. Reporting them didn’t even occur to me. I smashed their skulls and blew out their knee caps. Truthfully, if the commanding officer hadn’t pulled me off them, I would have killed them then.

But none of it mattered because I missed the most important sign.

I entered Mia’s quarters with a bag of pastries in my hand. The shower was on, the pitter-patter of the water running. I left the bag on the only table in the room and headed for the bathroom.

I knocked on the door. “Mia,” I called out.

No answer. I knocked again, then pressed my ear against the door.

It was then that I heard soft sobs. “Mia, I’m coming in.”

I waited three heartbeats for a protest before I pressed down on the handle and attempted to open the door. It was locked. I rammed my shoulder against it. Hard. It didn’t take long for the door to give way to my frame.

Taking a step into the small bathroom, I found Mia sitting in the shower, still in her uniform. Her clothes were soaked. No more blood and ripped clothes, but I saw the bruises that her uniform hid when I found those three

fuckers on top of her. It mirrored the bruises, cuts, and gashes on her face. The old scars I spotted that day hit me right in the chest. She hid those from everyone but that day, as I carried her to the infirmary, I got a glimpse of them. I finally understood why Mia Russo refused to go swimming.

I stepped into the shower, uncaring of my own uniform. I wouldn't wear it much longer anyhow. After the shit I'd done, I'd probably face a court martial. If I was lucky, a dishonorable discharge.

I lowered myself onto the shitty tiled floor. Everything in these barracks was shitty. But hey, we were serving our country. Except that some of these men were no more honorable than the men of the underworld.

Mia refused to look at me and my chest tightened. I should have kept a better eye on her. From the moment I spotted her, I got a distinct feeling she didn't belong here. When I learned who she was, I knew she didn't. We got to know each other over the last several months, and slowly I learned there was so much more to Mia Russo than met the eye.

We even had a few things in common. Parents that failed us. Fucked up childhoods, although Mia's was worse than mine. A lot worse than mine.

Turning my head to the side, I watched her. She had a long gash down her right cheek, both her eyes were blackened and her nose was broken. But even with that, she was a beautiful woman. A broken woman but beautiful nonetheless. Those gray eyes. She didn't smile often, but when she did, her eyes would light up like she had just gotten the best gift. Thick auburn hair against her petite frame. Honestly, I wasn't sure how she survived boot camp.

"Mia, look at me," I demanded. My hands shook with the need to go find those assholes and beat them all over again.

She couldn't even look at me, staring blankly in front of her.

"Mia, they can't hurt you anymore."

She blinked, then slowly turned to meet my gaze. "I can't go home."

"You don't have to," I assured her. "You can come to New Orleans. I can set you up there."

Her face crumpled up.

"Branka's there alone," she murmured. "She can't stay there."

"We can get her and you can keep her with you." A soft sob escaped her, the look in her eyes reminding me of gray skies right before a storm.

She shook her head, a single lone tear sliding down her bruised cheek. Or maybe I was imagining it and it was all just shower water. Her eyes

were red and swollen.

"Will you keep my sister and brother safe?" she whispered the question. "Promise me you'll keep them safe."

"I promise."

She took my hand and squeezed. "Don't forget your promise, Nikolaev."

Fuck, I failed her.

Anger rushed through me as I watched Branka disappear from my sight. And my life.

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Chapter Three

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SASHA

I had done plenty of things wrong. Plenty of stupid things. And more than enough fucked up things too.

This, on the other hand, felt right.

Stalking Branka Russo brought a strange kind of peace. She had been the first thing that made me feel something good in my entire life. It was a different kind of feeling from anything I had ever felt before.

Like I found something that was mine and I wanted to hold on to it. Or maybe those gray eyes had grabbed ahold of my tarnished soul, and now I'd never be the same.

I wasn't sure if that was a good thing or a bad thing.

Even worse, she was quickly becoming an addiction. It only took a day, but it took me a whole week to realize it.

Branka and her friend walked through the park, snacking on some pistachios and sipping wine. It made no fucking sense to me. Maybe it was a Canadian thing.

They sat down on an empty bench and tilted their faces to the sun.

Whatever they were talking about had Branka's pursed lips tipped up into a blinding smile. The smile wasn't for me, but it sent something surging through my veins. Her hair glittered under the California sun - shades of red, brown, and honey in perfect balance.

The moment she threw her head back and laughed, something in me shifted.

Except I couldn't tell whether something had been broken or repaired.

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Chapter Four

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BRANKA

The California sun hung low in the sky, the heat of it still glowing on my skin.

I wore a blue, sleeveless dress that fell to my knees in waves from my waist. The straps on my shoulders bared half of my back, and I combined it with a pair of nude heels. Autumn opted for a green, sleeveless dress with a closed back and pair of flats. She said it was more practical. She was right of course. But for me, it was easier to hide behind beautiful dresses than plain clothes and get-to-know-you questions.

My eyes traveled over the fancy restaurant. I shouldn't be in this territory. I knew it, but the odds of someone recognizing me were slim to none.

My father and his cruelty earned him a lot of enemies over the years. The family that controlled this territory of Los Angeles was one of them. The Konstantin family.

According to my brother, they were the Russians that took over control of the west coast. Twin brothers who didn't have the best relationship with Father. *No surprise there*, I thought wryly.

I searched my memory for the names and came up blank. All I remembered was that Alessio said they could be ruthless when double-crossed, and Father didn't get along with them because they were against human trafficking coming through their Siberian territories. Alessio ended that business, but Father still occasionally went behind his back.

No fucking wonder our family was doomed. All the suffering our father inflicted on others.

There was no coming back from that. Generations of the Russo family would pay for his sins. Good thing I had no intentions of marrying or having children.

Ilias and Maxim Konstantin.

The names hit me out of nowhere, and I smiled satisfied. Alessio always said to pay attention to names and keep aware of the enemies. The Konstantins were part of the Russian mafia, but they didn't get their hands dirty like most Bratva. Their style was more sophisticated, but they didn't hesitate to exercise brutality and elicit fear in the hearts of their enemies.

Now I started to wonder whether this was smart. Although what threat could I possibly pose? An eighteen-year-old girl that wasn't part of the underworld.

Constantinople was one of the most expensive and elitist restaurants in Los Angeles, located in the middle of the city. The name suspiciously close to Konstantin but the ownership was vague. The restaurant was smack in the middle of their territory, so it would make sense if they owned it. It was one of those mysteries that everyone wanted to solve but nobody could get their hands on the answer.

Ownership aside, the restaurant was very popular and frequented by movie stars, mob families, and politicians alike. Nothing showed corruption as much as L.A., but who was I to judge. My own family wasn't exactly all rainbows and roses.

As I waited for the hostess, I stared out the window, watching laughing couples stroll by hand in hand. People looked so happy and something tightened in my chest. I didn't like to wish for something unattainable. It made that first year after Alessio and Mia left unbearable.

The floorboards creaking.

He was closing in.

Stale breath. Sweat. "Your father gave you to me. To break and mold."

My throat squeezed. Fear cut off my breath.

Dark chuckle. "We're going to play."

My skin seared, the pain shot through me. Cold fingers.

"It will only hurt a bit." My lungs squeezed. I couldn't breathe.

"I'm in the mood for a pizza." Autumn's voice pulled me out of the dark memories that I had buried. My hidden scars itched. "You?"

A smile pulled on my lips at her excitement. Her eyes turned a greener shade, which told me she was happy. I fucking loved her happiness. It was

contagious and pushed the darkness away from me.

I returned the attention to the bustling waiters and chattering crowd.

Autumn took my hand. “I’m so excited we get to eat here,” she beamed. “Maybe we’ll run into someone famous. Like Jaymes Young.”

Or someone dangerous. But I held those words back. “Somehow I cannot envision him eating here,” I answered instead.

The hostess greeted us with a smile, took Autumn's name because I didn't dare give her mine, and, within ten minutes, we were seated.

“Wow, this place really loves red,” Autumn remarked.

The interior of the restaurant was decorated in various shades of the color.

“Probably a reflection of all the bloodsuckers,” I remarked, referring to both the businessmen and the mobsters that frequented this place. They were one and the same in my book. I saw firsthand how corrupt the men that should protect the world were.

Sighing, both of us looked around the restaurant. My eyes traveled over different guests. We were in the general seating area. There was a section behind a heavy curtain, the waiters bustling in and out.

Someone famous might be behind there. Definitely not here.

A waiter ducked through the curtain, pushing it out of the way and leaving it open.

And suddenly, I sat up straight.

The guy from the other night sat there. A woman, tall and gorgeous, sauntered towards their table and sat down next to him. Her blonde hair was the same exact shade as my guy’s.

I shook my head. *No, not my guy.* Just a random dude I’d kissed.

All three men stood up and sat back down once she was seated. Once she acknowledged the men, her eyes wandered the room until they came to mine, and she stared as if she knew exactly who I was. God, she had those same freakish pale blue eyes. She had to be his sister. There was no way those two weren’t related.

My eyes left her and went back to *Moye Serdtse*. Whatever that name was. My heart thundered strangely and blood thrummed in my ears.

The memory of the kiss invaded my mind. It was the first time I had truly enjoyed a man’s kiss. A man’s touch. I wanted more. Maybe I was greedy or stupid, but I knew finding a man who could touch me without my

body freaking out had never happened before. I shouldn't question it too much.

He had yet to look my way, but I had a feeling he knew I was here. I'd bet my life on it. My eyes drifted to the other two men who looked to be twins. A gorgeous set of twins though they weren't identical - one with dark hair and one with lighter brown hair.

And it was then that I knew exactly who they were. The Konstantin twins.

There was a lethal energy about both of them, but especially the darker haired twin. His eyes moved from table to table, like a panther watching its surroundings for any danger. His eyes came to me and something flickered in them.

Recognition.

No, it couldn't be. I shook my head as if trying to convince myself I was wrong. That I was paranoid. I had to be.

Alessio kept me out of the underworld on purpose. So Father's enemies couldn't spot me. So my brother's enemies couldn't recognize me.

Yet, I was certain this man knew exactly who I was.

"Branka." Broken out of my staring, I turned to Autumn to find her watching me with a worried expression. "Is everything okay? You look like you've seen a ghost."

"Yeah, I'm fine."

Autumn's eyes traveled to the table where the Konstantins sat. She tilted her head and returned to watch me.

"Are they connected to your family?' she asked in a low voice. I swallowed, then nodded. Without hesitation, Autumn stood up. My eyes lifted up to hers in question. "We're leaving."

"But–" I cleared my throat. "You were so excited for this place."

She shrugged. "We'll get pizza somewhere else. I'd rather see you comfortable." She smiled and extended her hand.

I took it and we left without a backward glance. Just as we stepped outside, a guy shoved past Autumn causing her to lose her balance. A misstep and she winced, pain crossing her expression.

"Watch it, you fucking moron," I hissed after the guy who didn't even bother acknowledging us.

I reached to steady her and the moment she took the next step, I knew something was wrong.

“I think I twisted my ankle,” she grumbled. I helped her as she hopped to the outside seating bench.

“I should go after that fucker and break his ankle.”

A strangled laugh escaped her. “You can be scary sometimes, Branka.”

I just grinned. “For people I care about, you bet I am.”

Checking on her ankle, I noted it swelling. Walking on it would only make it worse.

“I’m going to go get the car. You wait here. Okay?”

“I could just kick myself for my clumsiness,” she muttered.

“It’s that asshole’s fault.”

With a last check on her, I headed to the back of the restaurant where we parked. I hurried down the alley, disliking the idea of running into anyone while in such a secluded spot, I was almost at the end of it when another set of footsteps joined mine.

Halting in my tracks, I turned around to see none other than the man who kissed me a few days ago striding towards me purposefully, his huge frame clothed in a custom suit. I preferred him in jeans and a leather jacket.

I stayed still, watching his sure strides bringing him closer and closer to me. A part of me urged me to run, but not because I was scared of him. It had nothing to do with it; though, my gut warned he should be feared. The urge to run had something to do with the raw need that clawed at my chest.

With each step he took closer to me, my heart thundered harder as I drowned in that pale blue gaze, colors of the Arctic sea beneath ice.

“What are you doing here?” he demanded to know. I raised one eyebrow at him, refusing to show him any emotions. “This is not a safe part of town for you.”

That was a bizarre comment. He didn’t know me. I didn’t know him. How in the fuck would he know what was safe and wasn’t safe for me?

He remained standing, never glancing away from me, and I realized he waited for an answer.

“It’s as safe as anywhere else,” I told him. We stared at each other as he stood five feet from me. Even from this distance, I had to tilt my head back to maintain eye contact with him.

He took a step closer. So did I. And another, until there was barely an inch between us. My head tilted back further to keep eye contact. My heart thundered in my chest at seeing his eyes burn with *something* that I couldn’t quite understand.

My neck craned further, watching those blue flames in fascination. Our bodies almost touched, our gazes locked, but I kept my breathing even as my heart thumped with something unfamiliar.

His hand came up slowly to cup my cheeks, his big hands gentle. Almost like a lover's touch.

I froze, unable to say or do anything, as his thumb slowly traced my jawline, the rough pad of his thumb stroking my soft skin. A shiver wracked my body, but I didn't move. I watched him anxiously, worried whether he was a good guy or bad guy. As his thumb traveled lower and settled upon my racing pulse, I realized my body had already decided.

"Who are those men?" I asked, my voice breathy. I needed my suspicions confirmed.

If he was connected with the Konstantin family, maybe he was an enemy too.

He leaned in closer, his mouth brushing against mine. "Don't worry, kotyonok. None of those men will ever get close to you."

The vehement, lethal tone of his voice made me believe him.

"You want to know why?"

A gulp sounded between us. Mine. "Why?"

He leaned in, lining his mouth with my ear, his scruff rough against my skin.

This man was a predator, hiding in the skin of a man.

"Because you're mine." The words were quiet. Soft. Yet, there was conviction in his voice that sent another shiver down my spine. "I want you all to myself. I'm yours. You're mine. No one else can have you."

For the first time, my body didn't protest against being owned by a man.

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Chapter Five

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SASHA

A week later, I was still in California. I found reasons to stay and excuses why I shouldn't go.

I even took an extra job that normally I wouldn't consider.

Leaning against my motorbike, I watched a black sedan pull up in front of the warehouse by the docks. A black sedan with tinted windows, hiding the view of who was inside. I never moved, but my hand was behind me, ready to pull out my gun.

The car came to a stop and Maxim Konstantin exited. My eyes traveled over him. Unlike his twin brother, Ilias, Maxim had light brown hair. It was their only distinction. That and Maxim's IT expertise with surveillance. His twin brother, who ruled their family *business* and was Pakhan, was tall with dark hair and even darker eyes. Go figure.

Unbeknownst to most, the Konstantin family owned most of the malls in California. And some in Russia. It was their legal front and a very efficient way to clean money. Ilias, due to his position in the hierarchy of Bratva and his Pakhan role, was the target of many assassination attempts. Did that keep him out of the spotlight? Fuck, no. His brother, Maxim, on the other hand always remained under the radar. It was almost as if he hid behind his twin brother.

Just for that, I didn't particularly care for him. Vasili was the oldest of our family and ran our businesses but the rest of us, Alexei and I, stuck our necks out for the family. We'd never hide behind Vasili.

But maybe Ilias preferred his twin brother to work behind the scenes. Whatever, not my problem.

As good as I was at killing people, Maxim was good with hacking into governments and fucking with them. Sometimes even starting a war just so he could benefit.

“Nikolaev.”

“Maxim.”

My eyes traveled over him. He had two men with him. Like that could save him if shit hit the fan. He and his friends would be dead before I could say *boom*.

“Thanks for meeting me,” he started, stretching out his hand. I flickered a glance to his hand. I wasn’t a germaphobe, but I didn’t particularly care for fake pleasantries. Normally, I’d never accept a job from him, but the timing kind of worked. And everything Russo related was always of interest to me.

“Let’s get to the specifics,” I told him. If I didn’t like the assignment, I’d just not take it.

“Russo has my woman and I want her back.” My eyebrows shot up. Alessio didn’t strike me as the kind of guy to take someone else’s woman. “He snatched her while we were at my cabin.”

“Are you sure he has your woman?” I replied. “Alessio isn’t in the habit of kidnapping women.”

Maxim’s lips twisted. “His old man is.”

Ah, that made more sense. The old Russo was in the habit of snatching whatever he wanted. The cruel bastard. I’d never understand how Mia and Branka could be a product of that man.

“I’ll need the details.”

No answer.

“Have you reached out to Alessio?” I questioned. “He has eliminated that business from their territory.”

“It happened in Alaska,” he hissed, pushing his glasses up his nose. The tremble of his fingers didn’t escape me. “Anything outside the Russo territory doesn’t concern Alessio.”

Good point.

“Why would the old man take your woman?”

“I hacked into his system and emptied his bank account.”

My eyebrows shot up. “I didn’t realize you’re strapped for money.”

After all, the Pakhan was more than loaded.

“He didn’t pay for a business transaction we finalized.”

It made sense. He had to collect. Letting him off the hook was out of the question. You let someone get away with it once, word was bound to get out and more people would try.

“You might have a better chance working directly with Alessio,” I suggested. “Make him aware.”

Thick silence filled the air.

Something about this whole thing rubbed me the wrong way. I waited, watching Maxim’s face for any telltale signs. He had a good poker face. Fucker!

“If I reach out to him, he’ll put men on his sister and surround her.”

Alarm shot up my spine. He better not be threatening Branka.

“What does his sister have to do with it?” I growled. My voice would have made a lesser man shit their pants. But Maxim grew up in the brutal world of the Bratva, watching his brother rule with a firm hand.

“Woman for a woman,” he retorted although I could see a hint of conscience cross his face. He didn’t like hurting women any more than I did.

“I’ll take the job,” I told him. “But I’m going to give you a warning, Konstantin. You touch a single hair on Alessio’s sister’s head, you’ll be a dead man. You better pray nothing happens to that woman because you’ll be the first man I come after.”

I had a promise to keep, and I’d be damned if I failed.

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Chapter Six

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SASHA

Three days, and the whole thing went to shit.

I tailed the old Russo and couldn't get his habits down. Why? Because all I thought about were the eyes of stormy clouds. I had asked Alexei, my younger brother, to keep tabs on her. I didn't have to worry about him saying a thing to anyone. He just took it as another one of my odd jobs. Most importantly, there was nobody I trusted more than Alexei to keep her safe.

I, on the other hand, had to get my shit together and stop thinking about Branka Russo and worry about bringing this job to a close. In all my years, I had never lost a tail. Well, there was a first time for everything because I fucking lost the old Russo once.

Me. Sasha Nikolaev.

I fucking lost him as I followed him leaving his place because I was stalking his daughter remotely. If Vasili knew, he'd piss his pants laughing. So, I'd make sure he never found out.

God, that woman made me pussy whipped without even getting a taste of her pussy.

Jesus Christ!

Maybe the best thing I could do was to keep my distance from her. It was unhealthy to be so possessive.

I saw firsthand what it did to people. How it threw them into a spiraling madness until there was nothing left but death. A smashed skull and broken body.

The Russo compound on the docks of Alaska was enveloped in darkness and he had the scum of the scum with him. I planned for five guards. Tops. There were at least twenty.

Fuck!

I followed the old Russo from Montréal all the way to fucking Alaska. Jesus, I wasn't sure which was worse for freezing your balls. So here I was in Juneau, Alaska, on the roof of a building across from the warehouse that the old Russo was visiting. Using my lens, I watched them through the single window as they moved around. It was hard to gauge where they were without being inside.

According to the data I retrieved, the old Russo owned a few warehouses near the docks here in Alaska. But not for much longer.

I entered the compound on foot. I couldn't enter it in my car without triggering their security system and cameras. It was parked about a mile away, and if shit hit the fan, I was going to be hard as fuck out of luck. I lived for this shit, but fuck, I wanted to survive another few years.

Blyad, I'd have to get into that warehouse. One way or another.

I hooked the rifle on my shoulder, checked my handgun in the holster, screwed on the silencer, then checked the gun tucked in the back of my pants and my knife tucked into my boot. Then with a last glance at the warehouse and its layout, I headed back inside and made my way through the large empty space. It seemed all the men were in the other building where the old Russo was.

My information indicated that the woman Maxim wanted was kept there, but I had no proof. I was operating on pure instinct. With every yard I breached, awareness hit me. And the smell of blood. You never forget the smell of blood and dead bodies. Once you got a whiff of it, it remained with you forever.

I expected the compound to be armed and secured to the max. They were at war with the Irish. And with the *Famiglia*. And then there was the Corsican mafia that hated him and wanted to end him. And last, but not least, there were a few Bratva families that wanted to crucify him.

Why? Because the old man liked to screw people over. In more ways than one.

Despite my large frame, my footsteps were silent against the gravel-lined path between the two buildings. It was ingrained in me even before I joined the military, but special forces training beat it into me. It was the best

thing that could have happened to me. It was the discipline my father didn't bother training me on because he was too busy chasing his own dick.

The woman he loved. The woman he couldn't live without.

And my mother–

I couldn't even go there. That psychotic, madwoman ruined me before I even started living.

Not even Vasili knew the extent of Mother's madness. Nobody knew what exactly happened that day. Nobody knew the words that were exchanged. Just Mother, myself, and a baby who had no memory of it. My little sister. Tatiana was so fucking close to dying that day, before even reaching her first month on this earth.

My brother tried the best he could to be our mother, father, and brother. He didn't exactly fail, but it wasn't the same.

Just as I turned the corner, I saw the small, side entrance. And only one man manning it. Before he could move and raise the alarm, I shot him, the silencer doing its job.

Running to the entrance, I sucked in a calming breath and then raised my gun. I pushed the door handle and went inside the brick warehouse. To my surprise, I found the whole fucking room pitch dark.

Where the fuck is everyone?

They were just here. I saw them. Yet, at this moment I couldn't hear a single breath. Not a single movement.

Fuck, I hoped this wasn't a trap.

If it was, I'd come back as a ghost and wring Maxim's ugly neck.

I let my eyes adjust to the dark, then started to move. My hand was on the trigger of my AK-47 and I kept to the side walls. There was a room at the far back, a single indoor window between the two walls separating it. I rushed to it. With my back smashed against the wall, I peered in and saw an empty room. Except for a single chair.

With a woman sitting naked in it.

"Goddamn it," I muttered under my breath.

She was tied to the chair, her hair glistening with the blood that soaked it. Fuck, it was her. Maxim's woman. So fucking deformed, but I knew it was her.

Her mouth was taped shut. Her body was a mass of blood and bruises. I didn't know if it'd be better if she was alive or dead. For her sake.

I moved to the door and entered the room, staying alert. The last thing I needed was to be ambushed by Russo and his fucking men. I'd rather not start a war with him. Vasili wouldn't thank me. The old Russo wasn't an enemy, although he wasn't a friend either. All Nikolaev business went through his son, Alessio Russo.

She didn't even move once I entered. *Dead. She was dead.* My stomach sank.

A quick scan around told me there was nobody else in the room. But there were corpses of more women stacked on the floor in the furthest corner that I hadn't noticed before.

And there was the reason for the stench.

Fuck!

Maxim should not see his woman in this state. This had to go beyond a stray hacking job. What kind of beef did Maxim have with the old Russo that would make the old man kidnap his woman?

Pulling up my phone, I dialed up Nico Morrelli. If anyone had information, it would be that guy.

"Nikolaev," he greeted me in his way.

I wasted no time with pleasantries. "Morrelli, I need to know what would cause a feud between the old Russo and Maxim Konstantin"

"Hello to you, too, fucker."

I chuckled. "Oh, I'm sorry. I forgot how much you Italians like to talk. How is life? Your cappuccino machine still working? Your–"

"Jesus. Stop talking, you annoying Russian," he cut me off, humor lacing his voice. "Funny you should ask this because I just learned that the old Russo had an agreement in place with the old Konstantin. The Konstantin twin, Maxim, was to marry one of the Russo girls."

Something violent and deadly spread through my veins. My jaw ticked and my chest twisted with something unfamiliar. Aversion to Branka belonging to anyone made me want to set this place on fire.

"When was the agreement made?" I questioned.

"It was part of the marriage contract. The old Konstantin and the old Russo came to an agreement through Benito King," Nico explained. "The daughter's name wasn't called out but from the looks of it, the deal was probably to wed Mia to Maxim. Of course, that didn't work out when she–" He paused and we both knew why that didn't work out.

She committed suicide, in front of me. I couldn't save her. It seemed to be an ongoing theme in my life.

"Do the Konstantin brothers know?" I questioned.

"Yes," Nico answered. My phone cracked with the force of my grip. "It was on Maxim to fulfill it, but he found a loophole in the agreement and made it null and void."

So this was the old Russo's payback. Motherfucker.

"Don't tell me you got in the middle of that shit?" It was Nico's turn to question me. I ground my teeth. It was exactly what I had done.

"Do you know what made the contract void?" I asked instead.

Something about the silence that followed told me I wouldn't like the answer.

"The contract stated the woman would have no damage to her - physical damage." My ears buzzed with blood rushing through my veins. The anger burned my throat and marred my vision with a red mist. "When Mia died, the contract became for Branka. I don't know if I should do this, but I'm sending you a picture. Konstantin got his hands on a picture of Branka. She was scarred pretty badly."

My phone beeped and I slid the message open. My breath cut through my lungs. My blood burned. The little girl in the picture had burn marks and cuts all over her. Black eye. Her auburn hair was more red than brown from blood staining it. Branka sat in a corner, her knees against her chest and fear on her face.

"I have to go," I said coldly, while my blood simmered through my veins.

I ended the call and returned my attention to the body in front of me. *Cigarette burns.* I remembered them on Mia's body. I hadn't seen any on Branka's, but it didn't mean they weren't there.

My eyes continued skimming clinically over the naked body. It was then that I saw it. Carved into the woman's chest, amidst all the blood stains. ***Damaged product.***

I sent a message to Maxim. ***She's dead.***

And then I set the entire building on fire.

I couldn't wait to put a bullet into the old Russo's head. One day.

Maybe not today or tomorrow. But one day, I'd kill the fucking bastard.

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Chapter Seven

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BRANKA

For weeks, my body tingled with the awareness of being watched. It felt like the coolness from a freezer against heated skin.

But every time I looked around, there was nobody there.

I browsed the shelves at the grocery store. March in California was nothing like March in Montréal and I freaking loved it. Living in a dorm with my best friend, hundreds of miles away from my father, was the best part.

But I missed my brother. We talked and texted, but it didn't come close to seeing him every day. I wanted to make sure he was alright. Not that he couldn't take care of himself. Truthfully, he always took care of me, but it gave me peace of mind to see him and see he was good. Not happy. It was an abstract concept for us. If it wasn't for Autumn and her parents, I wouldn't believe in happiness.

I wasn't certain whether we'd have our shot at happiness after what Alessio and I had lived through. We were too tainted by our world.

Mia's casket was covered with vast colors. Red, pink, white, and purple flowers mixed over it.

She'd love it. She'd always loved vibrant colors, fashion. Anything happy and creative.

Tears stained my face, but I kept my cries silent. If Father heard me crying, there'd be a beating later. My chest hurt so bad as I pushed my hand against it, hoping it would make it easier to breathe.

It didn't. Something inside of me was broken. My eyes flickered to my mother who stared blankly at the grave. No tears. No sadness. No anger.

Nothing.

I didn't want to be like my mother.

My eyes found my big brother.

Anger burned in his eyes. I followed his gaze to my chest. It was too late when I realized he was staring at the cigarette burn on my hand.

Alessio jumped on Father and started punching him. Gasps, cries, exclamations. Mother didn't react. And I… I was so fucking happy to see my father's lip split. Blood on his face.

It was right then and there that I realized the truth about myself.

I had already been tainted by our world.

Because my little heart danced in my chest as I watched Alessio beat our father. I hoped he'd make his death long and painful. Extremely painful.

The hope was short lived. Father's men were already pulling him away from the head of the Russo family.

Alessio stood up to his full height and came over to me. I wasn't scared of him. The rage and fury in his eyes wasn't aimed at me. Only his fierce protectiveness.

He lifted me up and my hands wrapped around his neck.

"You came," I whispered, everyone around us forgotten.

"I'm sorry it took me so long, princess." He meant it. I could see the truth in his eyes. "Nobody will ever hurt you again. You and me, princess. Against the world."

For the first time since I saw Mia and Alessio disappear into the night two years ago, I smiled.

"You and me, big brother. Against the world."

My lips tugged up with the memories of my big brother. I'd stayed with him ever since; although, I did visit my mother once in a while. Alessio always came along, so I'd be safe. True to his word, he had kept me safe ever since. When I got old enough, I joined self-defense classes, but the problem was that everyone was scared of my brother and what would happen to them if they accidentally hurt me.

My brother saw me as the little girl who needed protection so he threatened the entire gym. Except, I didn't want to be just that. I wanted to be strong and capable of protecting myself also.

With the old memories as constant companions, I paid for the items and left the store. And all the while, my wrist ached. My father broke my wrists

too many times during those torturous, lonely years. The bones healed but the ache came and went. A reminder.

My fingers from the opposite hand wrapped around the wrist holding the grocery bag.

I never noticed the figure waiting for me in the darkness of the alley that led to the parking lot. A hand yanked on my wrist and the old familiar pain shot through my elbow.

“Hey!” I shouted, yanking on my wrist and causing myself more pain. Ignoring the throbbing pain, I swung the bag for his face. *Wack.*

By the time a hand wrapped from behind me, covering my mouth, I realized my mistake. I should have screamed.

I stared at the barrel of a gun pointed at me and my life flashed through my mind. The good. The bad. Ugly and happy memories. All of it. *Click. Click. Click.* I wasn’t ready to go.

In slow motion, I watched his hand with the gun fly through the air, coming for my face. Instinctively, my eyes squeezed shut, waiting for the pain to explode in my cheek. Just as I remembered it.

Full circle. How fucking ironic, yet I wasn’t laughing.

I counted my breaths, expecting the pain. *One. Two. Three.*

The pain never came. At least not mine.

A grunted yelp came from behind me. A savage growl. A scream and cracking bones in front of me. My pulse rang in my ears. My eyes shot open and I twisted my body to see what happened, but it was too dark. Shadows. Hissed words. Grunts. Yelps. I tripped over my own feet falling on my butt.

“Who’s crying like a little bitch now?” The deep voice mocked.

Planting himself between us, his broad back in my full view, he twisted the guy’s wrist. Jesus, he had really broad shoulders. Maybe he was an MMA fighter.

“Run.” A low, dark voice vibrated through the air. “Five-minute head start.”

The voice was familiar. My eyes roamed the darkness. I couldn’t see anything.

A hand stretched out from a dark shadow and I took it. The moment our hands touched, electricity pulsed through my arm.

It had only ever happened once before.

Once I was on my feet, he retreated into the shadows. But I got a glimpse of pale, blond hair.

Before I could call out to him, he was gone. I followed, but there was no trace of him.

Only the faint scent of citrus left in his wake.

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Chapter Eight

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SASHA

Catching the guys was too fucking easy. Boring. Maybe I should have given them a ten minute head start. Didn't matter now.

They could have at least put some ass into their escape. Instead, they ran home. So fucking predictable.

I watched both jackasses run up the stairs. There were two apartments on each floor of the building. The little landing had rails and allowed fresh air through the steps. Probably better than the stuffy air of the building. After all, California didn't have cold winters.

Their steps pounded on the concrete floor, getting closer and closer.

I twisted a silencer onto the barrel of my gun. Didn't want to have the neighbors as an audience. The two lived together in an apartment owned by… guess who. Bratva.

Ding. Dong.

Maxim would get his ass handed to him when I got ahold of him. But first, he'd get a nice gift. Little body parts of his idiot minions.

They both ran, looking behind them, expecting me to chase them. But I was already in front of them. Amateurs.

My lazy gaze found one of them, just as he realized they'd fucked up. *Pop.* He stumbled to the floor with a bullet hole in his forehead.

"Bullseye," I muttered, just as his partner turned around and started running.

"Jeez, leaving so fucking soon," I asked in a bored tone, jumping off the little rail and cutting off his escape route. "Are you trying to hurt my feelings?"

He shook his head, opening and closing his mouth but no words came out. Like a fucking fish out of water, his eyes bulged.

I grabbed him by the collar of his shirt and pushed him back towards his apartment. “Pick up your friend and carry him inside.”

“B-but he’s dead,” he stuttered.

“You don’t fucking say.” Jesus, was being a dumbass a requirement to work for the Bratva? “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to kill him all the way. Just a little.”

He watched me like he believed me. I didn’t have time for stupid today.

“Pick him up,” I barked.

He hurried and stumbled as he tried to lift him. “Man, I didn’t do anything.”

“You went after a woman,” I told him coldly. “My woman.”

His step faltered. “Take him into your apartment,” I ordered. When he opened his mouth, I cut him off, “It’s open.”

“H-how?”

I kept my cool, keeping all thoughts of Branka out of my mind. I didn’t want to think about her now. I *couldn’t* think about her. Otherwise, I’d lose my shit and start my killing right here, out in the open.

“You didn’t think a door would keep me out.” Aiming my gun at him, I barked, “Move it.”

He shuffled, dragging the guy along and leaving a trail of blood. Fucking moron. I’d have to work fast.

The moment the door shut behind me, I fired two shots into the fucker’s kneecaps. His pained screams filled the tiny little apartment. I locked the door behind me, grabbed a piece of gum out of my pocket, crinkled the wrapper open, then threw the gum into my mouth as I watched him writhe on the ground like some goddamned whale.

I kneeled next to him, chewing on my gum. “You made a mistake going after what’s mine,” I told him conversationally. “I fucking hate when people go after what’s mine.”

I pulled out a knife from my boot. My guess was I had about ten minutes before the cops showed up.

“Maxim Konstantin sent you,” I claimed.

He shook his head, but the truth was on his face. I dug the tip of the blade into his ribs and the smell of urine filled the air.

“Let’s try this again,” I said softly, as I twisted the knife between his two rib bones. “Maxim Konstantin sent you.”

He screamed like a little bitch. And so high-pitched that the glass rattled. Jesus, this one should have been an opera singer. I swore I smelled shit. My lips curled in distaste. Maybe I’d cut this lesson short.

I withdrew the knife and pulled up his shirt to study the damage.

“You know, I can do this for days,” I drawled darkly. “Military has a way of teaching you effective torture techniques.” His eyes popped out of his skull. “Tell me and it’ll be over soon.”

When he didn’t answer right away, I sunk the blade into his abdomen, waited a second, then twisted the knife.

“Maxim,” he wailed in a high-pitched scream. “For his woman. A woman for a woman.”

I grinned. “See, that wasn’t so hard. Good job.”

I stood up to my full height, reached for my gun that still had the silencer on. Aiming it between his eyes, I pulled the trigger.

I smiled satisfied. “Bullseye. Every time.”

I HELD Maxim by his collar and punched him in the face.

Blood and spittle flew through the air and onto my clothes. That pissed me off even more.

“Didn’t I tell you she was off limits?” I growled, then punched him again. “What were my exact words?”

When Maxim didn’t even attempt to reply, my fist cracked Maxim’s jawbone.

“What did I fucking say?” I gritted.

No answer. Another punch and a tooth flew through the air. This was so fucking messy. I preferred just shooting motherfuckers. I never had to get too close and my clothes stayed clean.

“What. Did. I. Say?” I punched him in his ribs this time. He tried to block the blow but failed. Unlike his brother, Maxim was fucking weak. So goddamn weak that he was a liability.

Maxim’s eyes came up to me. Fuck, I didn’t like the grief in them. Come to find out, Maxim Konstantin fell in love with a whore. An actual

whore. She worked the streets of Moscow and somehow crossed paths with Maxim.

Jesus fucking Christ!

Ilias should have taken his twin brother and gotten him laid. Maybe if he had, Maxim wouldn't have fallen for the first woman that sucked his cock and she'd be alive.

"I didn't touch her," he spat out, coughing up blood. "You said, '*touch a single hair on her head, you'll be a dead man.*' I didn't touch her."

Was this fucker for real?

"You're really going to fuck with me on semantics," I bellowed. "You know exactly what I meant!"

Jesus, I was running on a short fuse lately.

"Should have been more specific," he rasped, coughing again.

I threw him to the floor of his office. A lovely office in downtown Los Angeles with a fancy view over the Pacific Ocean. We were a floor beneath his Pakhan brother. Of course the top dog would have the top floor. Nothing less was expected.

Maxim's blood smeared the polished, white, Spanish tile and my lip curled with disgust. His pained groans filled the room. People stared at us wide-eyed through the glass doors. What idiot mobster had an office with all glass doors instead of walls. As much shit as we did behind closed doors, this was dumb as fuck. Even if we weren't criminals, I wouldn't want all glass doors and windows.

What if I wanted to fuck a woman? Put a fucking black sheet over it? By the time you were done covering all the goddamn windows, your dick would be either deflated or too fucking blue and achy.

Maxim attempted to grab my leg and I kicked him, his body sliding across the floor and against the flimsy little modern desk.

"What the fuck is going on here?" Ah, the big twin decided to join us.

I turned slowly to find Ilias leaning against the doorframe. He didn't seem alarmed, but I wasn't fooled. He was just as much of a ruthless killer as I was. It was in his eyes that studied the whole scene.

"If you're going to kill my brother, you might want to get rid of the witnesses first," Ilias addressed me casually, his hands sliding into his pockets.

That was the problem. I never gave second chances, but I had no intentions of killing Maxim. Why? Because I understood his grief, and I

even felt sorry for him.

The agitation settled beneath my skin. It was so much better not giving people second chances. Then you didn't have to worry about them not appreciating that second chance and coming after you again. It saved me from looking over my shoulder.

"Don't kill him and I owe you," Ilias added in a cold voice. "He'll owe you as well."

"And what could you possibly have that I'd ever want?" I retorted dryly.

Ilias' lips curled. Not into a smile but something resembling it. "You never know."

Turning my head to Maxim, I glared at him. "I don't want to see anyone, and I mean anyone, following Branka Russo. You want to kill her old man, be my guest. Touch her, and I'll burn your fucking empire to the ground. Understood?"

"He killed my woman," Maxim sputtered, his tone whiny.

"You have my word," Ilias answered. "My word as a Pakhan and a Konstantin."

A terse nod and I left them behind me.

THREE HOURS LATER, I strode across the Berkeley campus gym wearing my usual gym gear. I couldn't keep away from the auburn haired woman and sure as heck I found Branka here. Her friend studied; Branka poured her frustrations into working out.

I knew she took self-defense classes, but somehow it never sunk in until now. My steps slowed and I watched her pummeling the mannequin. Her body was sweaty, perspiration running down her face.

A few college boys flickered glances her way and the desire in their eyes didn't escape me.

A growl crawled up my chest and got stuck in my throat.

"If you want to keep your eyeballs, keep your gazes averted and away from that girl," I said with a growl, shoving them all out of the gym.

"Hey, are you even a student here?" One of them had the balls to ask.

"I'll be your worst nightmare if you don't get out of my sight," I snapped, glaring at him. He scurried away like a mouse.

Returning my attention to Branka who was still pounding on her mannequin, I admired her figure. Tiny red running shorts and a matching sports bra. Her skin glistened with sweat and blood shot to my cock.

Jesus!

This was Mia's little sister. I shouldn't have these X-rated images floating in my head related to that girl. Yet, I did. So fucking many that a devious and sardonic amusement flickered in my chest. If Branka Russo knew what kind of shit I was into and what images played in my mind, she'd disappear faster than lightning.

The smell of sweat and the constant pounding of Branka's fists against the rubber echoed in the air.

I made my way to Branka as she paused her punching and reached for the towel, then wiped it across her face. She took a swig of water and it was then that she noticed me. Her eyes widened, and she pulled earbuds out of her ears.

"Never fight with earbuds in," I told her, smiling. She remained quiet, watching me pensively with that gray gaze. "You look like you can handle yourself in hand-to-hand combat."

Her neck bobbed. "Are you volunteering?"

I shrugged. "Unless you're scared."

Her eyes flashed with silver lightning. "You wish. It's just that usually nobody wants to do it with me," she said, then realizing how that sounded, her cheeks turned red. "Nobody wants to do hand-to-hand combat with me," she clarified quickly.

I grinned. "I do."

She let her eyes travel over me. She knew my size worked to her disadvantage, but my instinct told me she wouldn't back out. Branka had this fire inside her that she used to ignite her anger and frustration. I pulled out a knife, then held it out to her.

Her gaze flickered to my hands. "Won't you need something to defend yourself with? It's not fair if I have a knife and you have nothing." She reached for the knife, pulling it from my hand.

"I don't need a weapon to overpower you."

"Cocky, aren't we?" she challenged, annoyance flashing across her expression. "What are you doing here anyhow? You're too old to be a student."

"Ouch." I feigned distress. "Where is the respect for your elders?"

She rolled her eyes and we headed to the mats.

Branka was so fucking tiny compared to me. I'd have to make sure we trained without me hurting her. I bent my knees into a semi-crouched position and she mirrored my movement.

"Don't cry if I cut you," she mocked.

My lips tugged up. "I'll try not to. Now stop talking and attack."

She eyed me, shifted to the left then lunged forward to the right. She moved fast, but I sidestepped her attack. My hand wrapped around her wrist, then I whirled her around until her back was pressed against my front.

"Not bad, kotyonok," I praised, watching my inked fingers against her pale skin.

"You overpowered me," she said breathlessly.

She hated being overpowered. I could feel it in her breathing, in the stiffness of her shoulders and muscles.

Reluctantly, I released her and she remained immobile for three seconds, before she turned around to face me, a slight paleness to her skin alarming.

"Did I hurt you?"

Her eyes traveled around the room and it was as if she only now realized we were alone. "Everyone's gone."

"Kotyonok," I said, trying to get her to look at me. "Did I hurt you?"

Those gray skies met my gaze and she shook her head, slowly.

"No, you didn't." The pressure in my lungs eased and my breath swished out. I'd rather cut off my hands than hurt her. "Can we go again?"

I nodded. Again and again.

She was a quick study. Her body was strong and I loved the determination on her face as she followed my directions. Each time I overpowered her, she was less and less intimidated, until her body no longer stiffened each time I did it.

It was fun teaching her. And slightly disturbing for my balls, but I ignored my cock, which zeroed in on her. This was for Branka. I hoped she'd never have to use it, and if she did, that I'd be there to protect her. But if I wasn't, I wanted her to be powerful.

We were at it again, her eyes flickering to me, then to my balls and I knew her angle immediately. I was even impressed. I snatched up her foot as she tried to kick my balls and tugged.

She landed on her back with a loud thump, still gripping the knife.

“You’re getting good, fast,” I told her. I knelt beside her, touching her shoulder. “You good?”

A frustrated breath left her. “How did you know?”

I chuckled.

“How did I know you were going for my balls?” Her cheeks turned even more red, and it had nothing to do with the exercise we just underwent. “Your eyes lowered to them. It was the only reason I knew.”

“Damn it,” she muttered.

“I’m still impressed,” I told her. I reached for the red water bottle which had to be hers. It had her initials on it. “Yours?” She nodded. “Drink. It’s important to be hydrated.”

She took a swig of it then offered it to me. I shook my head. I had barely broken a sweat.

“What made you want to take self-defense?” I asked her casually.

A slight tension passed her shoulder. “It’s important to be able to defend yourself,” she answered. “In our world.”

Our world. Did she know who I was?

“Our world?”

“Yeah, this world,” she muttered. “You never know when you might be ambushed.” She tilted her head, her eyes meeting mine. “So who are you?” Before I could answer, she continued, “Yeah, I know *Moye Serdtse* is your name.” My lips curved. That was one of the best things I had done. Had her call me *Moye Serdtse.* One day, I would be her heart. “By the way, that is a very strange name.” I nodded in agreement. “But that’s not what I meant.” Her eyes coasted over me. “Obviously, you can fight. You’re not a student here. Nor a teacher. So who are you?”

She remained quiet, watching me and waiting. I raised my hand and tucked a strand of auburn hair behind her ear.

“Who hurt you?” I asked instead. It was her father but there was someone else who hurt her too. I wanted names.

It was the reason the Konstantin and Russo agreement was null and void. Unfortunately, the Konstantin brothers didn’t have a name. Only a photo of a little girl, naked in a cell with her knees pulled up to her chest and marks all over her body. Burn marks.

Fuck, it hurt my goddamn stone heart to see it.

She jumped up to her feet and sauntered away from me. The visible scars were gone, but I’d bet my life the invisible ones were still there.

Her hand on the exit door, she glanced at me over her shoulder.

“I asked my question first,” she said. “Not very gentlemanly to answer a question with a question.”

“Good thing I’m not a gentleman.” I offered her one of my grins, hoping she’d fall under my charms. “I’ll be seeing you again.”

She shook her head, then disappeared from my view.

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Chapter Nine

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BRANKA

Well. *Moye Serdtse* kept his promise.

For the next three months, each time I went to the gym, he'd been there. Oftentimes, I felt his presence when I walked around campus, either alone or with Autumn. And I knew it was him. I could feel him like the sun on my skin.

Weird? Fuck yeah.

Stalkerish? Double yes.

Did I tell my brother? Fuck no.

I liked *Moye Serdtse*. My sixth sense didn't flare up warning me he'd hurt me. He was safe. Maybe not for the world, but definitely for me.

So I allowed my stalker to become my shadow. The best part, my self-defense skills improved tenfold. He'd even taken me to the gun range and taught me how to shoot. I was good.

Autumn didn't question my need to go to the gym every day. Some days I even went twice. *Moye Serdtse* was there. As if on cue, everyone in the gym would disperse every time the two of us were there.

After another round of vigorous self-defense exercise, the two of us sat on the mat drinking the water. His bottle had initials on it too. C.H.

I tilted my head towards it. "Wrong initials?"

"Yeah, they were all out of M and S."

I scoffed. I didn't believe him. It was a custom printed sprout lid water bottle by Takeya. Not exactly cheap. In fact, there was nothing cheap about this guy.

“So what do you do for a living?” I asked conversationally as I stretched my legs.

“Nothing interesting.”

“I bet,” I retorted dryly, not believing him. A heartbeat of silence followed and I couldn’t let it go, so I continued with my questions. “So how do you know the Konstantin twins?”

He cocked his eyebrow. “You know who they are?”

I rolled my eyes. “Duh. They own the best malls on the West Coast.”

Okay, so maybe I wasn’t being completely honest but neither was he. I started to wonder if this man wasn’t part of the underworld. He had that air about him, and it would make sense, except I had never heard of that name. *Moye Serdtse.*

Mentally, I made a note to look up his name. It couldn’t hurt, right?

“So you work out a lot?” I questioned as I switched to my other leg, stretching it and then moved to my shoulders. “You look like you do,” I remarked with a tiny bit of drool possibly showing at the corner of my mouth. I ignored it. Drooling after men was not my hobby.

I rolled my shoulders next. My muscles were getting an intense workout with him. My reflexes became better by the day, and I was getting stronger. It was exactly what I needed. It gave me the confidence that I could defend myself if my father tried to hurt me again.

“How are your studies coming along?” he asked casually, doing his own stretches. He wore black sweatpants and a super-tight white shirt that showcased his amazing body and gave me a glimpse of the ink on his skin. It would seem he was really a big believer in tattoos.

I locked my eyes on his chest, wishing he’d take the shirt off so I could study his ink without any obstacles in my way. Instead my eyes lowered to his hands marked with those fascinating symbols.

“They’re going okay,” I told him. “Autumn, my friend, is a lot more dedicated to it.”

“Don’t you enjoy marketing?” There was nothing but curiosity in his voice.

“I do, but sometimes I wonder what’s the point,” I muttered. “If I’m not able to work in the field at the end of it all.”

“Why wouldn’t you?” he demanded to know.

I shrugged. There was no way I could explain to him something that made sense. Alessio would never let anyone take me or let Father marry me

to someone neither one of us approved of. However, Alessio was honest from the get-go. The Russo family had way too many enemies for me to have a normal, average life.

Marriage was a hard pass for me, but it would seem it might be a necessity to survive.

Whatever. I'd think about it when the time came, not now.

"Do you love it?" he questioned and when my eyebrow arched, he elaborated, "Do you love marketing?"

It didn't surprise me that he remembered. It was something I mentioned the first week I met him. He seemed to recall all our conversations.

I nodded. "I do. As stupid as it sounds, I like the notion of persuading people to look at something." My lips curved up. "Autumn, she hates it, but she loves photography. She's really good at it too. One day she'll take photos, and I'll blast them across the internet."

He chuckled. "I look forward to seeing your blast on the internet."

This time we both laughed.

"I have to leave town," he said minutes later. My head swished his way and he gave me a heavy look that expressed feelings I couldn't quite understand. Was he worried about me? "I might be gone for a while, but keep up with the training."

A strange disappointment settled in my chest. I waited for him to say something else. Anything else.

He didn't elaborate. And it'd be another three years before I saw him again.

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Chapter Ten

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SASHA

I had left California barely twenty-four hours ago and already managed to piss off my big brother. Of course, it didn't take much. Fumes emanated from my big brother sitting behind his desk.

I leaned in his office chair, back in New Orleans. The city was our home. We frequently traveled back and forth between Russia and Louisiana, but it didn't take long before we considered New Orleans our home. Father took up residence here and started his *business*. Vasili took over that business and expanded it by tenfold. And he also set up a number of legitimate businesses.

Vasili was better at it than Father ever was.

I swirled my glass of whiskey. Ice clinked against the crystal and cigar smoke hung in the air. But I kept my cool.

"Why in the fuck did you take a job for Maxim?" Vasili gave me a hard look. "I don't like it. Dealing with the Konstantins always brings problems."

"This won't," I told him confidently.

"Sasha, Ilias is Pakhan. Everything connected with him brings trouble. Not to mention that the old Konstantin was a crazy motherfucker. I'd rather keep both those fuckers as far away from Tatiana as possible. She's a single woman and I don't want her around men like that."

"You don't have to worry about that. Even if she was promised in an arranged marriage, Tatiana would first kill you, then claw her eyes out before agreeing to marry anyone, never mind Ilias Konstantin."

Vasili’s expression darkened at the thought of our little sister marrying the older twin.

“No more dealings with the Konstantins,” he gritted.

I sipped on my drink, leaning back and forth in the chair. Vasili’s jaw ticked, and I knew he was ready to blow a gasket.

“Correct me if I’m wrong, but didn’t we agree it’s my choice and decision who I do business with?” I reminded him.

His jaw tightened, his vein throbbing. I always did a good job of pissing him off. Both Tatiana and I did. He was the responsible one, my sister and I were the reckless ones. Alexei was, well, Alexei.

“We agreed to it if your choice doesn’t impact our family,” he said dryly.

I ran a thumb across my jaw. “This doesn’t impact our family. Just me. I took the job and it’s done now.”

“Tatiana said you had lunch with her and the Konstantin brothers.” He switched subjects, the furious expression still lingering in his eyes. “Why in the fuck would you ever have lunch with them? And with our sister?”

I shrugged my shoulders. “I was having lunch with my sister. The Konstantin brothers showed up and Tatiana extended them the courtesy of joining us. Neither one of us expected them to accept it.”

“Of course they accepted it,” Vasili grumbled, his tone dry. “Our sister has a way of making men look at her twice.”

I rolled my eyes. “If you say so,” I retorted dryly.

“Did you finish the job for Maxim successfully?” My brother was trying to throw me off my game. Sneaky fucker.

The whole job still left a bitter taste in my mouth. “His woman was already dead,” I said, hiding how much the whole thing fucking bothered me. “I’m going to kill the old Russo.”

“The fuck you will.”

“Yes, I will.” I swore the tips of Vasili’s hair looked fucking red. It was just too goddamn easy to rile up my brother. “Do you have gum?” I asked casually.

His fist came down on the table, rattling every single thing on it. Not that there was much there. But sure as fuck, a *People* magazine was there. The latest edition too. I had yet to understand Vasili’s fascination with *People*.

“Fuck the goddamn chewing gum,” he roared. “I swear to God, Sasha, if you cost us our family I’ll end you myself.”

I grinned. We both knew he’d rather claw his eyes out than hurt me. “Be my guest.”

“If you kill him, Alessio Russo will come after us,” he reasoned. “After Tatiana. Is that what you want?”

I shrugged. “We can protect our little sister.”

“No, I’ve been protecting her.” His voice was dark. “I’ve been protecting both of you, and fuck, if I’d let something happen to either one of you now.”

I rocked back in my chair. “I’ll put extra men on her. The old Russo is a scumbag. He’s not worthy of walking this earth.”

“You’re hardly one to judge,” Vasili hissed. “And you’re not impartial. Your relationship with his eldest daughter made you biased in anything Russo related.”

Animosity lingered on my tongue and danced in the air.

“Fuck you. And fuck impartial,” I growled.

Thick silence filled the room. I was perfectly content to just sit in it. Unfortunately, so was Vasili. I had my own glass with ice in it and I swirled it, each clink of the cube like a gong banging through the air.

A clock ticked.

Vasili finally let out a sardonic breath, shaking his head.

“Why are you checking up on Branka Russo?” Vasili’s question shattered the silence and brought in a new kind of tension. “Wasn’t her sister enough?”

My jaw ticked. His comment rubbed me the wrong way, but not as much as his control over everything I do. I shouldn’t be surprised he was checking up on me, but it pissed me the fuck off.

“Who says I’m checking up on her?”

“Don’t fuck with me, Sasha.”

“Brother, you’re the last person on this planet I’d want to fuck with.” I stared at him with indifference.

“Answer my question,” Vasili demanded.

I watched my big brother. He had given up a lot to keep our family together. To keep us safe. I appreciated him. I really did, but at this point in our lives, he really needed to stop acting like our father and just start being our brother.

“I made a promise to Mia Russo before she died.” I settled with an answer that would give him a half-truth. Vasili lifted a questioning brow. “That I’d keep an eye on her brother and sister,” I explained.

“Alessio Russo doesn’t need babysitting,” Vasili retorted dryly. “And if he finds out you’re watching his baby sister, he’ll dig your eyeballs out.”

I shrugged. “He can try and he’ll fail.”

“One day shit will catch up to you, Sasha.” He was probably right but you had nothing if you didn’t have confidence. And I was one of the best, trained by good old taxpayers’ money.

“Promise me you won’t approach the girl.” When I didn’t answer, his gaze narrowed as he took a sip of whiskey. He kept waiting for that promise.

Too fucking late because I’d been seeing the girl almost daily for the past three months. The most platonic relationship I had ever experienced, and I felt a deeper connection with her than women I’d fucked in the past.

I’d never particularly cared about conversing with women. My sister was the exception. But with Branka, I found myself wanting to know everything about her.

“Promise me,” Vasili demanded.

“I made a promise to a dying woman that I’d keep an eye on them,” I replied. “To keep them safe. You’re asking me to break that promise.”

He shook his head.

“I’m asking you to promise me not to approach the girl.” The cold bit into my chest at the thought of not seeing or talking to Branka again. I was just teaching her self-defense and our conversations were merely around generic subjects. She didn’t even know my name for fuck’s sake. “That kid gets hurt, Alessio will find someone to blame,” he added.

I got up, finished with this conversation and buttoned my jacket, then turned to leave.

“If not for your own safety or for me, do it for Tatiana,” he said as my hand came to rest on the door handle. “We’re fighting enemies on all sides, Sasha. If we are not careful, it will cost Tatiana her life. Woman for a woman is the way men in our world think. Branka’s father is trying to pick a war with the Konstantins. And we don’t want to bring Konstantin’s attention our way. For Tatiana’s sake.”

He got me there. There was nothing I wouldn’t do for my baby sister.

“I promise,” I replied before walking out.

Ominous silence and consequences followed me out the door.

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Chapter Eleven

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SASHA

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Three Years Later

Montréal in September was a pretty sight. Until I found myself seated across the table from the old Russo. The fucker was a pathetic excuse for a father.

He just buried his wife and here he was talking about fucking other women. I couldn't even imagine how pissed off Alessio was. He hid it all better than any other man I knew. I heard about the stunt his father pulled. Cassio said he flew home to bury his father and the old fucker was alive and well. It was his mother who died.

Jesus Christ!

The old Russo was a fucking bastard with the blackest soul. He belonged in hell, right along with my mother.

A vein throbbed in my neck, the need to lunge across the table and stab him in his ugly eyes clawing at me. Or fuck the eyes. It should be plunged directly into his black heart and ugly soul. Anger brimmed inside me, sending a rush of heat through me.

I didn't need to turn Vasili's way to know he kept flashing a warning look my way. He knew my feelings on the old Russo, but he didn't want to fuck up the deal with Alessio. If only the old fucker would get out of the goddamned way.

"This is the fastest way for shipments to get into the States," the old man bragged. "Why should we give you a break?"

"Hardly a break," Vasili answered calmly. "You're making a thirty percent profit."

"We accept your deal," Alessio cut in. I liked the guy. He was a bit dry and a tad bit insane underneath his polished suit. I remember what he'd

done the day of Mia's burial when he beat his father into the ground. Truthfully, I kind of enjoyed the show. The only regret was that he didn't murder him right there and then.

The door chimed, signaling another customer coming in search of food.

I flicked a gaze across the restaurant and spotted *her*.

Three years.

Three goddamn years of stalking her from the shadows and using technology. She continued her self-defense classes. She finished her studies and was ready for the world.

She definitely wasn't ready for me.

As she stood there, chatting with a girlfriend, my blood ran hotter. The annoying feeling every time I remembered the promise I made to Vasili rushed over me. *Son of a bitch*. She was even more beautiful. Her body was fucking centerfold-worthy. Just her presence in the same fucking city burned through my skin and straight to my dick.

The sun hit her hair, her auburn brown strands falling down her back. It was thick and wavy. And long. So fucking long that I could wrap it around my fist twice. I watched as she smoothed her palms over her short, red dress, chatting to her friend and smiling happily.

"Daughter," Branka's father called out, and I watched Branka's shoulders stiffen. She slowly turned around, her expression pale as she warily eyed her father. For that, I wanted to strangle the old man right now. "They don't need a table, Jasmine." Branka's father barked, drawing everyone's attention to us. "They'll sit with us."

The day was looking slightly brighter, although I didn't want her sitting at the same table as her sick father. She still hadn't noticed me nor my brother. Each step brought her closer to me, but her eyes remained on her father, every so often flickering to her brother.

She trusted her brother to always protect her. But I protected her too. Always. Until my last breath.

Alessio stood up, his eyes on… Branka's friend. *Interesting*. I stood up too.

Branka's eyes traveled to my brother, her eyebrows furrowing. Then her gaze landed on me and recognition flickered in those gray eyes. It was the only thing she shared with her brother. Her gray eyes. Although, I was inclined to think, her eyes were prettier than her brother's.

Branka's eyes darted to her friend and then returned to me.

“Ladies, meet Vasili and Sasha Nikolaev,” Alessio introduced us. Branka’s eyes widened and her lips parted. It would seem the girl knew my reputation. “Gentlemen, my sister, Branka Russo and her best friend Autumn Corbin.”

“Nice to meet you,” I drawled, my eyes traveling to Autumn Corbin, then back to Branka. “I didn’t realize the ladies would be joining us.”

There were only two available seats. One seated next to me and the other next to Alessio. The two women watched the fucking seat next to Alessio longingly. A sardonic breath left me.

So I pulled out the seat next to me, my eyes on Branka and not giving her a choice. If she refused, it would bring attention to herself. I waited for her to lower herself into the chair, but her gaze kept sliding to the empty chair next to her brother.

“Is our discussion appropriate for the ladies?” Vasili asked, his brows furrowed. “I wouldn’t want my sister to be troubled with such topics.”

“We can go.” Branka quickly volunteered. The girl wanted to be as far away from me as possible.

“You’ll both stay,” her father demanded.

Her friend gulped and Branka’s shoulders slumped.

“Sit down, Branka,” her father barked. “You too, Autumn.”

They both startled and immediately lowered themselves into the seats. Red anger slithered through me at her father’s tone. My palm itched. The need to retrieve my blade and stab it through his heart was as intense as the need to take my next breath.

“*Ne*.” No. One word by my brother but it only fed this fury boiling inside me. The fact that the old fucker was egging on, and tormenting, Alessio’s woman ignited the anger even more. I tuned out the old man’s conversation or I’d kill him right here, in the middle of the restaurant.

My ears buzzed, the anger was strong enough to burn my throat, my chest, and marred my vision with a red mist. The old man was oblivious, but the tension at the table was like fingernails against a chalkboard.

I threw gum into my mouth with a grin while the need to beat the old Russo’s face into the table clawed at me. I’d bet all my money that Alessio wanted to put a bullet into his father’s brain even more than I did. The old fucker was really digging Branka’s friend. He kept blabbing about Branka’s friend and her connection to Blanchet's family.

Corsican mafia.

Jesus Christ. A small fucking world.

But that was of no concern to me. By the way Alessio watched Autumn Corbin, he'd keep that girl protected.

I popped the gum as I crushed the wrapper in my hand, imagining it was the old Russo's neck I was squeezing.

Leaning back, I rested a forearm on the table and focused my gaze on the pretty brunette that was adamant about not looking my way. If I had to guess, Branka was tuning out the conversation too. She sat still, her gaze distant, focused on a spot somewhere above her father's head.

Mia had shared some of the shit she saw thanks to her father. Truthfully, she shouldn't have been allowed to join the army. She was mentally fragile, and after years of endless torment by her father, it only took one incident, though an awful one, to push her over the edge.

From the corner of my eye, I noticed Alessio typing a message on his cell.

I popped another bubble, earning myself an Oscar for my performance and the cool façade I maintained.

Her father shot up and left the table without a parting word, scurrying off. By the smug expression on Alessio's face, I'd wager he set it up so his father would get the fuck out of here.

"Fucking finally," I said coldly. "You should have that asshole eliminated. I can help with it."

"I agree," Branka muttered under her breath. "Let the Russian take the blame." Everyone's heads snapped her way. I grinned, watching her eyes widen realizing she spoke the words out loud. "Did I say that out loud?"

"Just give me a date and time," I uttered smiling, watching her calculatingly. "And it's done."

"I can handle my father," Alessio claimed.

"Can Autumn and I go to the bar?" Branka quickly jumped at the opportunity to get away. From me.

Her brother nodded and the two women scurried away, like the devil was on their tail. Maybe we were devils and they were innocent angels. Just waiting to be corrupted.

"I can have him gone today," I repeated my offer now that the women were gone. "Like your gorgeous little sister pointed out, the Russians will be to blame. All you have to do is give me your little sister," I deadpanned, a grin on my face.

“Sasha,” Vasili warned.

“Let me make one thing clear,” Alessio gritted. “My little sister is not on the table. Never will be. SHE. IS. OFF. LIMITS. And if I have to kill you to make that point, I will.”

Challenge accepted, motherfucker.

I made a promise to my big brother that I'd keep my distance. But that didn’t mean I’d do it indefinitely. Once her old man was dead, I’d go into full-blown conquer mode.

Because Branka was mine. There was nowhere she could go where I wouldn’t eventually find her.

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Chapter Twelve

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BRANKA

Moye Serdtse.

Moye Serdtse my ass. I was an idiot to think he would have given me his real name.

Three years of nothing. We shared a kiss. He saved me more than once. He taught me self-defense, how to shoot a gun, and how to use a knife in a fight. And then he left and never came back.

Just like Alessio and Mia all those years ago. Fear crept into the corners of my mind and I felt like that scared little girl again. Weak and vulnerable. Blackness threatened to swallow me whole, just like every beating I survived during those two years without my brother.

Catching my breath, my fingers trembled as I smoothed them over my clothes. I hated being alone and even more, I hated being left behind. Two years without Alessio and Mia were hell. The day of Mia's funeral, Alessio took me back and cared for me. Autumn's parents gave me a welcome and family that neither Alessio nor I ever had.

And still, the frightened little girl refused to leave. You'd think ten years of healing would be enough. It wasn't.

Bottom line, I hated being left behind and Sasha had left me. I never heard nor saw the man again. Nothing. Zip. Nada.

I lost hope that I'd see him again. Never in a million years did I think I'd find that same man in the Montréal restaurant, sitting at the same table with my brother and father.

Sasha Nikolaev.

Fuck.

I had heard of his reputation. Psychopath. Unhinged. A killer.

For a short moment, I had been swooning after a killer. Oh my gosh! Thank God for small blessings that he never came back. And thank fuck, he never asked me for a date. Every time we met at the gym, I hoped he would and I would have totally said yes.

Alessio would have blown a gasket. My big brother was so protective. Ever since he snatched me from my father's grip the day of Mia's funeral, he had been so protective. He thought me fragile, but I'd survived those two years all on my own. I had to, dying wasn't an option.

But Sasha Nikolaev. *Moye Serdtse.* For those short months, he never treated me like a fragile little doll.

I had so many questions. For a psychopath, he seemed really nice. At least during those three months that he trained me. He made me stronger, and for that I'd always be grateful to him.

The damn deceiver.

I pulled out my phone and googled *Moye Serdtse.* In the past, I resisted the urge to look him up. Why? Well, I never gave him my identity, so it only seemed fair. But fair was off the table now. I'd bet my life that the liar knew my identity all along.

My step faltered. "My heart," I muttered. That guy had me calling him '*my heart*' all this time. There was one other adjective that should be added to Sasha Nikolaev's name. Prankster.

I rolled my eyes and walked through my brother's mansion. Dark and quiet. Lonely. I fucking hated being alone.

Those two years, from the age of eight to ten, were the longest, most lonely years of my life. So when people said alone time was good for your soul, I'd just flip them the bird and tell them to fuck off.

Why in the fuck did Alessio send me home with Ricardo?

It would have made more sense if he would have asked Ricardo to drive Autumn home and he came home with me. But Alessio always had an agenda. Not that I blamed him. It required conniving to stay one step ahead of Father.

I made my way to my room. The moment I stepped into the sanctuary of my bedroom, I kicked off my shoes. My best friend preferred comfort, I loved my heels. It was easier to stab someone with a heel than flats.

I grabbed a hair tie from the dresser and pulled my hair up into a messy bun. I was so engrossed in my thoughts that I hadn't noticed *him* until I

came chest-to-chest with the broad, tall body. Palest, freakiest blue eyes I had ever seen.

Sasha Nikolaev.

My lungs seized. My ears buzzed.

“What are you doing here?” I croaked.

He was not a man I wanted anyone to find me with. Alessio would murder him if he knew he dared to enter my bedroom. And now that I knew Sasha’s real name, I couldn’t blame him.

Sasha’s reputation preceded him.

I remembered hearing that he broke the kneecaps of three men and smashed their skulls while serving in the military. Or another tale of a man he skinned alive. Fucking alive. The reason? Unknown.

Father once called him Satan’s spawn. My own father was a sadistic bastard so if Sasha’s cruelty superseded his, maybe I should stay away. Yet, that slightly unhinged look in those pale blues didn’t make me panic.

Maybe all my fear was already used up. Or maybe I was more broken than I thought.

The two of us watched each other. Sasha stood tall, his broad shoulders filling the leather jacket perfectly despite his stocky form. He stood with his hands hooked in his jean pockets.

He changed his clothes, I thought for no reason at all. In the restaurant, he wore a suit.

His posture was casual, but it was deceiving. There was nothing casual about him. The glimpse of ink on his neck and fingers warned. Most of Alessio’s friends had ink, but there was just something different about Sasha’s ink.

On him, tattoos were a warning, not art.

“Branka Michelle Russo,” he drawled, his tone like a sweet tart, but his eyes promised something entirely different. Something that was about to consume me.

“So you knew my name all along?” I accused.

There was no need for answers. Confirmation was on his face, and he didn’t even bother hiding it.

“Your water bottle,” I said, although not sure why. It didn’t even matter. “That had the wrong initials too. C.H. Were you scared I’d recognize you if you had the right initials?”

The tug of his lips told me I amused him. “In the Russian Cyrillic alphabet, C is S and H is N.”

Annoyed, I narrowed my eyes and glared. “What are you doing in my room?”

The corner of his mouth tugged upward. Like my question amused him. Or maybe he was just toying with me - like a cat with a mouse.

“And here I thought you’d be happy to see me,” he drawled, the smile on his face sharp as shark teeth. And still butterflies fluttered in my stomach.

“You thought wrong.” *You left and never came back*. For some stupid reason, that bothered me most of all. “What are you doing in my room?” I repeated through clenched teeth.

“What do people do in bedrooms?” he deadpanned. Was he insinuating–

The smirk on his face told me he was hinting at exactly that. His next words confirmed it. “But then, we can do that pretty much anywhere. In a car. On a plane. On a balcony while clueless people go about their business below us.” My thighs clenched. Good God, what the heck was wrong with me? Or him? Definitely him. “In an alley. On top of a monument.”

I gave him a slow, plain blink, refusing to engage. Do. Not. Engage. This man could kill me with a single grip. Or set me aflame and that would be self-destructive.

Yet my tongue didn’t listen. “Sleep,” I retorted sweetly. “Or in your case, snore like an old man.”

He took a small step forward, I took one back. Repeat.

“Whatever you’re thinking about doing,” I breathed, “-don’t.”

My back hit the wall. My heart hammered against my ribs. My breath hitched. Sasha stared at me intently. Those eyes penetrated through all my defenses, probably digging out all my secrets and all my fears. And like a fool, I held his eyes, letting him trap me with the gravity of his gaze.

It’d only be a matter of time before he discovered all my dirty secrets, leaving me exposed to him. To exploit. But I’d discover his secrets too. I refused to wither - under anyone.

I survived my father, I’d survive anyone.

“After I’m done with you, it will be *you* snoring,” he purred.

The insinuation in his voice didn’t escape me. There’d be no sleeping involved until he’d exhausted me. With his body. I liked the images that

played in my mind. *I think.* Jesus, I needed more space from this man. Like an entire city's worth of space.

"Get lost before I scream and have your throat cut," I said flatly, although my heart raced and my skin buzzed.

Something thickened in his eyes, hot and heavy, and then he grinned. Fucking grinned, like he was a shark that just caught his next meal.

"Go ahead," he urged, rocking casually on his heels. "I love screamers."

My face was on fire. My gaze dropped and I heard his chuckle. It was kind of freaky. Kind of sexy. Goddamn it. This man was a fucking lunatic. Yet, my heart banged in my chest. I couldn't pretend I didn't smell his cologne. The clean, citrusy scent. I couldn't pretend I couldn't feel the heat of his body, so close to me but not close enough.

"I'd rather eat dirt than scream then," I retorted dryly.

"Did you continue practicing?" he asked. The subject change had me eyeing him suspiciously.

"Yes," I finally answered.

"Good girl," he praised. "I bet you're really good."

Was he talking about my fighting skills or–

My mind must be in a lust-filled gutter.

I kept staring at his eyes that somehow had the power to pull me under. His icy eyes sharpened and a smile tilted his lips. My mind went blank. What the hell was happening to me? This damn guy had to get out of my room before I did something seriously wrong.

Like take the clothes off his big body, I thought to myself. I wondered if ink marked every single inch of his body. The idea of seeing him naked made butterflies flutter in my belly. Not because I was attracted to him.

I absolutely wasn't. He wasn't my type. Too old. Too bulky. Too many tattoos. And there were those freakish eyes that watched me while a devastating smirk twisted his mouth.

His hand came to rest next to my head, his palm flat against the wall. My chin tilted up, watching him wide-eyed. He invaded my personal space and unwanted heat sparked inside me.

"Get away from me." My tone came out breathy, insinuating quite the opposite. Like I was begging him to fuck me.

Something hot flashed in his eyes. Like he was pleased with my reaction. He inhaled deeply, his broad chest brushing against my breasts and my nipples hardened.

The room closed in; the oxygen evaporated. My body wanted him.

Oh. My. God. My traitorous virgin body wanted Sasha Nikolaev. No, no, no.

A small victory flickered in his eyes.

“Don’t worry, kotyonok.” His tone was dark. Hot. “You’re not ready for me yet. Not all of me anyhow.”

This guy was nuts. A complete lunatic. A voice inside me whispered not to fight as a war waged between my body and my mind. In front of me stood a man who was all wrong - unhinged, bad reputation, killer. But my body refused to heed the warning.

So freaking odd. I had the need to feel a man’s hands on me. I thought that died a long time ago, yet around this man, my body trembled with a sweet craving to feel him. On every inch of my skin and inside me.

Alessio cured my visible scars. He hired the best plastic surgeons to erase them but it was the invisible scars that refused to go away. Years of therapy and meditation couldn’t heal those ghosts. Yet, I didn’t care about them around this man. Maybe because I sensed he had some too. Or maybe because I was an idiot.

“What if I was?” I breathed.

I must have surprised him, given his smile froze and his shoulders stiffened. Something resembling satisfaction and disappointment pooled in my stomach. I liked that I got one over on him and disliked that I displeased him.

He relaxed his body, smoothing the shirt with his big hand and I followed the movement, imagining how they would feel on my body. Ignoring my reason, I acted on instinct. I set the palm of my right hand on his chest, the warmth of his hard chest seeping through his expensive fabric.

“Maybe you’re not ready for me?” I challenged, my voice barely above a whisper. My body starved for his touch. But only his and that in itself was troublesome.

Sasha’s hand covered mine, his strong, steady heart drumming underneath my fingers. His thumb brushed slowly over my wrist, right above my vein where the pulse raced like I had just run a marathon.

I had no idea when my whole body pressed against his. My skirt brushed against his jeans and my thighs parted.

Something dark and hot simmered in his pale gaze that didn’t look so pale anymore.

He took my hand from his chest, then slipped them, locking both of my hands behind me. I tilted my chin and watched his every move through a half-lidded gaze.

He watched me like I was something precious, his hand stroking my exposed skin lazily up and down my neck. A shiver rolled down my back.

Surprisingly, I loved his touch.

My knees trembled. My pulse beat wildly. My skin buzzed with anticipation.

“You want to be fucked?” He leaned down, his face an inch from mine. I couldn’t find my voice nor sense. My pussy throbbed and I kept rubbing myself against him.

“No,” I lied, my voice breathless.

“Liar.” His hand traveled down, over my breasts, down my stomach and he scrunched up my dress. Before I could say anything, he slammed his lips down on mine. There was nothing gentle or sweet about it.

All my senses went haywire. He owned me. Consumed. Ravaged.

His lips moved against mine, demanding. He pushed his big body against mine, and I ground myself against him. I had lost all sense of control. I chased the pleasure. His other hand let go of my wrists and grabbed a fistful of my hair, his fingers tangling my strands and tilting my head at an angle. It allowed him a better angle to claim me.

Now that both my hands were free, I wrapped them around the nape of his neck and pulled him harder and closer to me. Heat sizzled, my grunts shattered the air. His tongue tangled and slid over mine.

I tugged harder on his hair, eager for more of this pleasure that kept building higher and higher in the pit of my stomach. His mouth tore from mine, then he buried his face in my neck, and his teeth sank into my flesh.

A gasp tore through my lips. He bit me, hard too. The pain and pleasure mixed. His mouth sucked the spot where he just bit, latching onto the sensitive skin.

In one swift move, he turned me roughly and had me face the wall. His chest was pressed against my back, something hard pressing against the small of my back. He was hard. And huge, I realized.

His lips were back on the curve of my neck, his fingers tracing a line down my spine. I pushed against his erection that was poking me, wanting more of him. Right now, I wanted it all. For the first time in my life, I wanted to go all the way with a man. A mere stranger.

Jesus Christ! This couldn’t be normal. Yet, I couldn’t find the strength to stop. I needed this.

He pushed my hair over my shoulder and his hot, hungry mouth roved over me as his body pressed against every inch of me. His tongue followed a line across my shoulder blades. Warmth spread through every inch of my body, my pussy throbbed and the moment he grabbed my hips to grind himself against me, my head tilted back against him and a moan left my lips.

And the whole time, both my palms were pressed against the wall. One hand held on to my hips while his other worked its way to my inner thighs. I jolted the moment his palm cupped my pussy.

“I’m not going to fuck you,” he rasped so low, I thought I was imagining his voice. “Not today. But you will scream my name by the time we’re done here.”

I exhaled a sharp breath. My breathing was erratic. My pulse even more so.

His thick fingers brushed my damp panties, then slid inside my underwear. My fingers curled into the wall, my body shuddered and a breathy moan vibrated the air.

His touch was rough, confident. And so goddamn greedy.

My pulse roared in my ears as he started to move his fingers, in and out. In and out. His lips brushed against my earlobe. His hurried breaths fogged my brain.

“Please,” I begged on a whimper.

He moved his arm, working me over. My toes curled and he nipped my earlobe.

“You’ll wait for me,” he demanded, his tone hard. “I’ll let you come, but you’ll promise me first that you’ll wait.”

I would have promised him my firstborn at that moment. I was on the brink of my first orgasm and like a greedy spoiled brat, I wanted it.

I fucked his hand, grinding against him like my life depended on it. His thick fingers slid in and out. Hard and fast.

“Promise me,” he ordered, tightening his hold on my neck. His fingers withdrew, smearing my wetness on my swollen, sensitive clit, rubbing lazy circles. It wasn’t enough. I wanted it rough and hard.

“Yes, yes,” I murmured, all my thoughts jumbled. I would have promised him anything as long as I got what I needed right now. “I promise.

Do it harder.”

He laughed, his mouth returning to kiss my neck, while his fingers pressed inside me. I writhed against him, my pussy clenching around his fingers. His increased tempo, the intensity, and pleasure burst from my center.

And I hated that he was right. I screamed. I came apart.

Then in one swift move, he moved us to my bed. “On the bed. Get on your hands and knees. Let me see that pink pussy of yours.”

My mind blanked but my body was already moving. I scrambled onto my bed, on my hands and knees when he pushed my dress up. Goosebumps traveled over my skin. He locked my wrists behind my back with one hand, while his other slipped between my legs and rubbed my swollen clit. The sound of my shredding panties filled the air and I glanced over my shoulder to see his face inching closer and closer to my ass.

This man liked power and definitely held it over me and my body. At least for the moment.

It was a reluctant admission that I’d never admit out loud.

“Can you give me another one?” he rasped, his hot breath against my backside sending shudders down my spine.

“A-another?” I breathed, mindless with the jolt of pleasure that he wrenched from me.

“Another orgasm,” he clarified. He pushed a finger inside me while keeping one finger on my clit. A half gasp, half moan filled the room and my eyelids fluttered shut. The sound must have pleased him because he hummed his approval. “Yes, you can give me another.”

My hands curled into fists, nails digging into my palms. His citrusy scent mixed with my arousal. I was panting so hard, I thought I’d pass out. My ass pushed against his hand, my pussy clenching around his finger.

“I can feel your pussy squeezing my finger.” He curled his finger and hit my sensitive spot, drawing another moan from my throat. “Are you imagining it’s my cock.” When I didn’t answer, he dragged his finger out, then shoved it back in. Hard. “Answer me.”

“Yes,” I moaned, the sound of slick wetness filling the room. In and out.

“Good girl,” he praised and my chest glowed. It fucking glowed. “You’re so tight. That pussy is mine and for my cock only. God made it for me.” He released my hands, but they remained behind my back. His hand landed on my ass. *Smack.* “Understood?”

The slap of his hand against my ass reverberated through the air, matching the explosion on my soft flesh. My ass cheek was on fire.

I forgot to answer and another slap on my ass followed. “Answer me, kotyonok.”

Closing my eyes, I relished in the sensation that exploded on my skin and evidence of arousal that trickled down my inner thighs. A strange tightness in my stomach and my nipples had me on the edge. My inner thighs were hot, tingly and my ass was burning. *Slap*.

My body jolted forward. I was tempted to just grind myself against the sheets and get relief, but his big hand gripped my hips.

“I can’t hear you,” he purred, his face lowered back down, his lips skimming my ass. “Who does this pussy belong to?”

“You.” My body’s reaction to him should scare me. It didn’t. It made me greedy. Wetness slicked my thighs and a brush of air against my bare pussy made me shudder with a need only he could satisfy. “Please, *Moye Serdtse*,” I begged.

He stilled. And I twisted my head around to look at him again. Fuck, the sight of him was glorious. The dark lust on his face was for me and made me feel victorious. Although I hadn’t done anything to earn his desire.

“Say it again,” he demanded, his voice hoarse.

I blinked in confusion. “Please?” I murmured hesitantly. I guess he liked to be begged.

“You called me *Moye Serdtse*,” he remarked.

“A habit,” I admitted, hinting at the fact I’d gotten myself off thinking about him. That earned me a beautiful smile from the unhinged mobster.

His mouth pressed against my ass cheek that he’d slapped, the feeling in such contrast to the earlier slap.

“For that, you’ll get rewarded.” His finger slid against my folds, smearing my wetness and then without a warning, he slid two fingers back inside me. My back arched, my skin heated and the handprints on my ass burned.

He elicited another moan from my throat.

He pushed my ass higher up in the air and his lips skimmed lower and lower, until his mouth replaced his fingers. My eyes fluttered shut and a loud moan vibrated through the air. His finger went to the swollen nub of my clit, flicking it and rubbing it while his mouth worked my cunt.

And his grunts were the sexiest sounds I had ever heard on this earth. I relished in the sensation, grinding against his mouth. Back and forth. Back and forth. And all the while his tongue slid in and out of me, tongue fucking me, and the explosion ignited in my core and burst through my whole body.

I dropped my head down, my screams muffled by the pillows. I screamed his name. My body shook with the violent pleasure he wrenched out of me with his mouth. A tremor gripped me, sending wave after wave of pleasure through my body, and all the while Sasha's mouth never left my cunt.

When my shudders subsided, Sasha flipped me around, my back hitting the mattress. My legs parted, wishing he'd fuck me. Right here and right now. I was ready. I wanted more.

He wiped his mouth with the back of his hand, his eyes burning with intense blue flames. He ran a tip of his finger over my bottom lip, smearing my wetness over it.

"One day, kotyonok, nothing will save you from me." His voice was coarse. I had no idea what he meant by it. His hand came to my throat, his grip firm and a shiver rolled through me as his lips pressed against my ear. "You're all mine now. From now until the end of time."

"Well, that's intense," I murmured, a languid sensation pulling on my muscles. "It goes both ways, you know," I murmured, my eyelids heavy.

He pressed his face into my neck, then inhaled deeply. A low growl of satisfaction sounded in the back of his throat and the deep, rough noise vibrated through every cell of my body.

"It does," he confirmed. "And don't worry, kotyonok. I will wait."

My chest lit up like the Fourth of July fireworks, and I tilted my head to bare my neck. This was… *addictive*.

"Remember your promise, kotyonok. No one else touches you." Another nip on my neck, soothed down with a kiss. "Or they're dead."

He rose to his full height - tall, big, and sturdy. He could break me with one move. Yet, I never felt safer than at this very moment.

But that little girl who feared being left behind surfaced and clawed at my chest.

"You left before and didn't come back," I blurted out, my voice trembling. "You going to come back this time?"

Blue eyes met mine and I feared he could see too much. I drowned in the deep sea of his blues and didn't bother coming up for air. My lungs

squeezed. My heart hurt. Yet, I didn’t hide. For some reason I let him see it all.

“I will come back,” he vowed softly. “No matter what.”

With a nod, he headed for the door.

I let out a little growl. “Remember your promise too, Sasha Nikolaev,” I said. I might not be as tough as he, but I wouldn’t be a pushover either.

He stopped with a hand on the knob and turned to me.

His gaze flashed, dark and rough. It rocked me to my core and set me aflame.

“I always keep my promises, kotyonok.”

And he was gone, but his words remained behind.

I caught an image of myself in the mirror. My hair tousled. My lips were red and swollen. My cheeks flushed.

I didn’t recognize myself. This wasn’t me. Making a promise to Sasha Nikolaev was playing with fire.

Yet, I knew without a shred of doubt I’d wait for him.

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Chapter Thirteen

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SASHA

I crossed the distance through forgotten graves as I approached Mia's burial ground.

Her face still lingered in my dreams. Her haunted eyes. There were nightmares plaguing her before those men attacked her. Afterwards, they were just dead. I hated that I had failed her. That I didn't protect her.

My military career was over. There was no recovery after you smashed the skulls of several men serving this country. And blew out their knee caps. I didn't fucking regret it. My only regret was that I didn't make them suffer for a long time. They were the tipping point that pushed Mia over.

My feet halted at a low weeping sound. I stood by the tree, watching a woman dressed in black stand next to her husband. There was no need to wonder who they were. Mr. and Mrs. Russo. One's eyes were cruel; the other's dead.

Alessio Russo. He stood over his sister's grave, his jaw clenched hard and expression dark. I could relate.

But it wasn't them who captured my attention. It was a little girl with auburn brown hair and gray eyes that reminded me of sad, rainy days. She also wore a long black dress that swallowed her small body. She was petite, her face pale.

She held her mother's hand, but her eyes kept searching out her brother, fiddling with her wrist. Her mother must have barely been holding her hand because the little girl jerked it almost as if they weren't holding hands. Her fingers wrapped around her wrist, and it was then that I saw it.

An ugly gash. Burned flesh on her wrist. Her sleeve pulled up and burn marks marred her skin, from elbow to right above her wrist.

Her brother must have noticed the same thing because the same second, he lunged after his father and started beating him.

Like a fucking madman.

It took three men to pull him off the old Russo. He took Branka's hand and lifted her up into his arms. The little girl's arms wrapped around her brother's neck and her tear stained face finally showed a hint of a smile. He left without a backwards glance.

The old Russo and his wife followed shortly afterwards.

Once gone, my gaze trailed back to the grave. I took slow steps. One, two, three. It took ten steps to stand above Mia's casket. My eyes locked on the shiny wooden surface. She was already six feet under, the ground swallowing the shiny surface.

"Fuck, Mia," I rasped. "I wish you stayed." No answer. Not that I expected it. Foolishly hoped, maybe. Just as I hoped I'd convince my mother not to do it.

"I made the fuckers pay," I said to the casket. "And I'll keep my promise," I vowed into the wind. "I'll keep them both safe."

For the past eleven years, I had kept an eye on them. More Branka than Alessio. The latter was ruthless and a killer, just like me. He didn't need much help. The little sister, on the other hand, was a different story. She needed protection - her brother's, mine.

Failing her wasn't an option. I already failed two women in my life, I'd be damned if Branka would be added to that list.

Something heavy settled in my chest. Maybe I was getting sick. Or maybe my mother's psychotic ass was finally prevailing in me too. My obsession was growing. Fast and steady.

Jesus Christ, if I turned into a raging lunatic like my mother, I might have to end it all.

I shouldn't have touched her, but I knew I would. Why? Because she felt like mine from the moment I saw her at Berkeley. But her moans sealed the deal. Her little, breathy moans were so damn sexy and addictive. Fuck, she was such a glorious sight when she orgasmed. The way bliss crossed her expression and how her gray eyes turned silver. Fucking silver, like some mystical creature sent to destroy me.

"Jesus Christ," I muttered, frustrated.

Getting another taste of her was a dumb move.

I made a mistake, and now, the wait would be fucking torture. I'd known for a while now she'd be mine. But I needed her a bit older. Ready for my kind of flavor of sex. And then there was the issue of her father and my promise to my brother.

And her brother would probably try to skin me alive if he knew I was after his sister. After all, he made his feelings clear on her off-limit status. Although, she'd be so fucking worth getting skinned alive for.

Shit, I let my dick guide me. Again! It happened every time I was around this woman.

Darkness cast the room with the shadows from the crescent moon. She was beautiful when she slept. But nothing beat her wits and sassy mouth.

My gaze swept down her body - from her red, sparkling toes to her cheeks resting on a curtain of long auburn hair. Her lips were parted as her breasts rose and fell with each breath. Her brows were drawn and her mouth tight. I smoothed a hand over her brow and her slightly shallow breathing evened out and her lips relaxed.

"We'll kill all those ghosts," I whispered. "You and me, kotyonok."

She didn't stir. Her bedside lamp was still on and I flicked off the light, then lowered myself into a rocking chair. I laced my hands behind my head and watched over her.

I didn't give a fuck that this was wrong. I knew I should have left the city. Instead, I snuck into Alessio's home. *Just to get a taste*, I told myself. Well, I got it and I was still here.

Fuck Alessio and fuck everyone else. At least for tonight.

After that little taste of her, I left but it took me only two miles to turn around and come back. I should have seen her to bed. But my control hung by a threat and I had to get the fuck out of there. The smell of her sex was intoxicating, luring me in. But I knew if I'd take her the way I wanted to, I'd lose her.

Fuck! I wanted to slap her for having this impact on me without even trying.

I wanted to slap myself even more for being an idiot.

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Chapter Fourteen

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BRANKA

"I don't want to go," I cried to Mamma. "Please, please. I don't want to go."

Her eyes were dead. Her face was black and blue. She couldn't save me. She couldn't even save herself. But there was nobody else here. Mia and Alessio were gone.

My wrist was broken and burnt. It ached. Father held my wrist to the fire, letting the flames lick at my skin. The smell of it stuck to my hair, my clothes, and my nostrils.

Mamma's face turned to mine and caught me off guard. The pain in her eyes held me captive, clawing at my chest. My tear-streaked cheeks and fear forgotten, I grabbed Mamma's hand and squeezed it.

Sadness in her eyes mirrored what I felt in my chest. Her gray gaze grew wet, like a rainy day over the highest mountains where only clouds were visible.

I fell down to my knees and wrapped my arms around her knees, pressing my forehead into her lap.

"I'm sorry," I whispered. "Don't cry, Mamma."

Her tears hurt worse than Father's cruelty.

"My poor, poor baby." She pressed a kiss to my forehead and despite what I knew would happen to me when I walked into the basement, my heart warmed. I was starved for affection. Love. When Mia and Alessio left, they took the tiny bit of happiness we had in the Russo household away with them.

“Mia and Alessio will come back for us,” I rasped, my voice hoarse. “You just wait and see.”

She pressed her frail hand to my heart. “Mia’s dead.”

My lungs closed up. My ears rang. I couldn’t breathe. Mia. Dead.

“A-And Alessio?”

I never got my answer. The door swung open and Father entered the room.

The whisper of his cruel voice and whips invaded my memory, the darkness and cold air sweeping in.

It pulled me deeper and deeper into the blackness and the cold, threatening to swallow me whole.

I shot up into a seated position, waking up with a start, the sheets sticking to my sweaty skin. My chest rose and fell, my heart thundered with the old familiar fear. Catching my breath, I laid back down and stared at the ceiling.

And all the while the scent of citrus lingered in the air.

I FINISHED PACKING the last of my things.

Honestly, I couldn’t wait to get out of here. Continents apart from my father wasn’t far enough. Shoving the last pair of cute shoes into my suitcase, I sat on it so I could zip it up. Autumn demanded only two suitcases. I was at three.

“Maybe she won’t notice it,” I mused to myself. She was so excited about this, she might not have noticed if I packed five suitcases until we arrived at our first destination, Kuala Lumpur.

Hmmm, *tempting.*

Deciding against it, I left my bedroom and went in search of my brother. My feet silent against the hardwood, I padded through the hallway of the second floor. He was usually in his office or the library. So that was where I headed.

Going through the itinerary in my mind that Autumn had shared, I already worked up a few landmarks I wanted to use to post pictures on my social platforms. Autumn had an eye for photography, I had a niche for marketing. Together, we were the perfect team.

I was so lost in daydreaming that the scent of stale cigars and old man cologne didn't register until I was already in the library. A shard of ice shot through my heart and fear crept into the corners of my mind. Darkness morphed into my mind, the old nightmares suddenly fresh.

It didn't matter how many years had gone by, the old scars surfaced too easily. I'd never told Alessio the extent of the abuse I'd gone through during those two years. I didn't think he could handle it. And I couldn't even stand to think about it, never mind talk about it.

Father's back was to me while he stared out the window and puffed on his cigar. I took a step back, prepared to get the hell out of there when his voice stopped me.

"Always running, little mouse." He turned from the window and faced me.

Tall frame. Broad shoulders. A dusting of stubble on his chin. Dark hair peppered with gray at the temples. But it was his eyes that ruined it all. The cruelty in them was impossible to hide even when he smiled.

He wore a suit, his one hand shoved in his pocket while he brought a cigar to his lips. He inhaled, then exhaled, the cloud of smoke seeping into my lungs, suffocating.

Fear gripped my throat. It was hard to get over it. It was hard to forget.

He took two steps forward; I took two steps backwards. I wanted to turn around and run, but didn't want to give Father the satisfaction of knowing how badly he had broken me. I hid it all behind pretty dresses and smiles, but deep down I was still that little scared girl, crying and begging for someone to save me.

Over the years, I learned to hide my fear in front of him. It was easier when other people were around. Honestly, I couldn't remember the last time I was alone with him. It was something I didn't care to experience again. Ever!

His eyes traveled over me. I wore simple jean shorts and a pink crew neck top with my hair pulled up in a high ponytail. The weather was still warm enough to enjoy summer clothes and thankfully, this year I'd be gone before the winter weather kicked in.

I hated dark and cold weather. It reminded me of that cold cellar Father liked to use to break my spirit. To train me to be a good and obedient wife.

Rage burned my throat, but unfortunately fear was stronger.

Father’s lips curved into that cruel smile I had come to know so well during those two years alone with him.

“It seems the little mouse is trying to be brave,” he mocked in a dark tone.

“What are you doing here?” *Alessio please be home*, I prayed. He liked staying in the penthouse and the only reason he had this manor was for me. It was dumb because we could have easily both stayed at the penthouse.

“What do you want?” I asked coldly, hiding my fear somewhere deep down.

His dark eyes flashed. “Watch yourself, mouse. Snakes can easily swallow you whole.”

I scoffed softly. “Your self-comparison to a snake is so fucking appropriate. They are disgusting creatures, but all you need is a shovel and you can cut off their heads so effortlessly.”

Ugly red blotches marred Father’s cheeks and I couldn’t stop a satisfied smile curving my lips. Ah, the small victories.

“You need to be married off,” he spat angrily. “And you need to be taught a lesson. Just like when you were that eight-year-old girl.”

My spine stiffened, the words sliced my heart and let it bleed. Blood dripped to the floor and pooled at my feet, pulling me under into the nightmare.

Dark was closing in on me. Bile rose in my throat. I couldn’t breathe. Terror-filled inferno.

“We’re going to play, little mouse.” His voice was dark, thrilling. The cellar was dark, mold and blood staining the air. “Don’t worry. Your father needs help breaking your spirit.”

I couldn’t breathe. Adrenaline raced through my veins.

Cold fingers in my hair. Rough hands tore at my clothes. My scalp burned as he gripped my hair.

Disgusting shudder rolled over my body. Goosebumps rose on my skin.

Scarred face. Evil eyes.

Slap. Lights flickered behind my eyes and pain exploded in my cheek. I kicked and screamed, my throat raw. My nails raked across his face and he reared back.

“Stop scratching me, you fucking cunt.” His stale, cigar breath invaded my nostrils.

An ugly gash marred his eyes. I hoped he’d turn blind. I hoped he’d die.

Another slap. His cold hands against my burning skin felt like sandpaper, rubbing me raw until I bled.

Pain wrapped around my body. Shreds of ice cut at my lungs.

“Don’t give up,” I told myself, unsure if those were just my thoughts or I was talking out loud. Keep fighting.

So I bit him. And I scratched him. Until my nails cracked and my fingers bled.

“What are you doing here?” Alessio’s voice barked from behind me.

One look at me and his expression turned even darker. He narrowed his eyes on our father. “I told you if you want to talk, you call me. You’re not welcome in this home.”

“Get lost, Branka,” Father barked. “Alessio and I have to talk about the Nikolaev deal.”

“You don’t get to talk to my sister that way.” My brother’s voice was cold. Final. “And there is nothing to discuss on the Nikolaev deal. It’s done and we will honor it.”

“It’s a mistake,” Father claimed stubbornly. “Sasha is Satan's spawn. Destruction follows wherever he goes.”

“You’re scared to deal with him,” Alessio stated matter-of-factly. “His psychotic ways bother you. If you think about it, it’s kind of ironic.”

I turned on my heel and left the room. I couldn’t stand to be in the same city, never mind the same room, as my father.

Though as I rushed back to my room and locked the door behind me, I liked Sasha Nikolaev more than I had an hour ago. He might not be a knight. Definitely not a hero.

But he was scary enough to chase ghosts away. He was scary enough to keep my father away.

I’d keep my promise, as long as he kept his.

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Chapter Fifteen

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BRANKA

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Four Years Later

I made a promise to wait. I waited.

Four goddamn years. If I was smart, I would have asked questions. Specifics. For Christ's sake, who in their right mind waited for someone for four years?

Branka fucking Russo. *Idiot!*

Four fucking years without the occasional phone call or a card. Fucking nothing. The dull ache bloomed in my chest. Heartbreak and loneliness became part of me, my constant companion. Every time I thought I was past it something would trigger it, and I was right back to being that little girl left behind.

Round and round we go.

First time he left, he was gone for three years. This time it was four. Fool me once, shame on you. Fool me twice, shame on me.

I sighed.

Maybe there was a reason people I love always leave me. Maybe I was worthless. Maybe I wasn't enough to fight for. Alessio came back for me when Mia was dead. He was my brother. Sasha Nikolaev didn't have any allegiances or obligations. And people broke promises every day.

My lungs closed up, and my throat tightened. The pain stole the breath straight from my lungs. I desperately took a breath in and exhaled. Then another one. But pain still lingered. That feeling of abandonment still lurked in the shadows of my soul.

It wasn't until my eyes darted to my nephew sleeping on the bed, that oxygen finally found its way into my lungs. I could finally breathe. A soft

giggle rang in the room. It was my nephew's. He had happy dreams. My lips curved into a smile and happy tears burned in the back of my eyes.

Kol Alessandro was possibly the first Russo to have a happy and safe childhood. He was my brother's son, although my best friend had yet to admit it. One day she would, I was certain of it. Autumn was a force to be reckoned with when it came to her son. Protective lioness.

Just as any mother should be.

My mother wasn't. Neither was my father. As I watched the life of New York City buzzing below me, memories drifted through my mind, pulling me back to the past. The past I preferred not to remember.

"Let's play hide and seek," Father announced to Mother and me.

It was Christmas Eve. My second Christmas without Mia and Alessio. I thought about them every day. They were my first thought when I woke up and the last thought when I went to sleep. I missed them so much, the pain in my chest raw.

My eyes flickered to my mother. She wasn't looking at me. She wasn't looking at Father. She stared at the fire cracking in the fireplace. From the outside, the atmosphere in this family room seemed serene. It wasn't until you were in the room that you noticed dark shadows lurking in the corners. Broken ghosts haunting us.

"I don't want to play hide and seek," I whispered, my voice raspy.

The skin on my thighs hurt from cigarette burns. Every movement shot pain through every inch of my body. My throat was raw from my screams and my lungs burned like someone fed me acid and needles.

"Get up and run," he barked. I jumped, Mother immediately rose to her feet. Tired and beaten down. That was what she reminded me of. I didn't want to become like that. I had to fight.

Alessio and Mia will come back. They'll come back for me.

But even as that hope lingered in the back of my mind, I could feel it dimming each day.

The dark tunnel under my father's manor was used for his enemies. To torture. To beat. To break. I didn't want to be here.

"Psst."

My steps faltered. My little heart thundered. I glanced around. There was nobody. Just dark and cold. Each exhale steamed in front of my face. I took another two steps.

"Psst."

*My steps froze and I held my breath. Somebody **was** here. Fear wrapped around my throat and cut off my breath. My heart raced in my chest, each beat of it cracking my ribs.*

Something touched me.

I flew through the air, then my body slammed against the wall, my head hitting the wall. Stars swam in my visions.

"Remember me, little girl?"

Blackness. I couldn't see. I blinked my eyes, desperate for my vision to return. My surroundings slowly came into focus, and it was then I saw him.

The man. I scratched his eye out. It stared at me but couldn't see. It was like watching a murky glass eyeball.

"Time to pay, little girl," he drawled. "Eye for an eye."

He didn't take my eye that day. My spirit still rebelled.

But he extinguished my hope.

Alessio had the best doctors in the country heal my physical scars. Those were easy to fix. The invisible ones not so much.

The hotel door swung open, the past drifted through them and out the hotel room. Autumn's parents strolled in with wide grins on their faces. I loved seeing their happiness. It gave me hope. It promised possibilities.

"Hey there," I greeted them. "You're back fast."

As odd as it sounded, Autumn's parents had shown me more affection and love since I'd met them than my own parents had in their entire lives. Autumn and her parents were the best thing that happened to me, next to my brother.

"We didn't want you to miss the show," Autumn's father beamed. "The exhibit was lovely."

My lips curved up. "I've seen the photos."

In fact, I was with her when she took most of them. I'd traveled with Autumn for the past four years across all corners of the world. Autumn had an eye and talent for photography. I had it for capturing attention and blogging. We worked perfectly together. What I lacked, she didn't and vice versa.

"You look nice, Branka," Mrs. Corbin complimented.

My eyes lowered. My dress was yellow and flowy with a nude crocheted bodice. The dress wasn't anything elaborate but the slit up the thigh gave it a little extra. The heels I wore were nude, matching the bodice, and laced up my calves.

“Thank you.”

They saw me to the door, a peck on the cheek, and I took the elevator down to the hotel lobby. As I strutted through the Aman Hotel lobby, I felt eyes on me but I ignored them all. I liked to dress up. When ghosts haunted, it felt like armor, allowing me to hide behind it.

And admittedly, sometimes it seemed silly to dress up. I enjoyed fancy things but Autumn’s comfort over looks might have rubbed off on me. Except that being on this continent made me want to dress up.

Just in case I ran into a psychotic mobster with pale blue eyes.

Did it make sense? No.

I was an idiot. There was nothing else to say.

The moment I stepped on the city sidewalk, I headed in the direction of the gallery. It was only a block away. It’d take me longer to flag a cab than walk to it.

A black Mercedes G-Benz caught my eye. The back door was wide open. It seemed odd. Especially with the crime rate in New York City. A flicker of gold had me turning my head and I froze. Sasha Nikolaev.

He held the door for a woman. A beautiful woman with curly blonde hair. I couldn’t see her well. Most of her body was hidden behind the car door, her eyes on the pavement. But there was no mistaking that she was beautiful.

A bite of jealousy shot through me. Ugly, red, and green. Like hate and envy.

Sasha’s eyes scanned the area. Like he was surveilling the area for possible threats to his woman.

He leaned into her and I watched his lips move.

I turned around and resumed my steps. Except, they felt heavier this time. The night seemed darker. A hot sensation trailed down my spine, and I couldn’t resist turning my head over my shoulder.

My gaze collided with pale blue eyes. My pulse missed its next beat.

His lips moved. “Come here,” I thought they read. “Now.”

My chest squeezed. I shook my head. I’d never go to him. He was nothing to me. This was nothing. I didn’t know the guy. I didn’t love him.

But knowing how my body reacted to his hands on me was intoxicating. I wanted to feel them on my skin once more.

Except that would never happen again.

He asked me to wait for him. I did.

Shame on me for trusting him. Sasha Nikolaev was history to me.

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Chapter Sixteen

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SASHA

Goddamn it!

I fucking hated that I made a promise to keep my distance from the Russo family. It left me stuck between a rock and a hard place.

I ran a thumb across my jaw as I waited for the doctor to finish his exam on Wynter. She was in bad shape, bruises and cuts all over her.

That with the combination of my promise to keep away from Branka turned my blood to fire. One second I stood still, looking out the window, the city buzzing with light and the next I'd lost it. I destroyed every goddamn piece of furniture in Cassio's office.

I'd known from that first kiss that there was no going back.

She was too young. She'd grow up.

She stole my fucking breath in that dress. The itch to go find her and see what she was doing was too great. I knew if I found her on a date in my current state, the whole city block would burn.

My hand shook with the urge to go after her.

"There's broken shit all around," Alexei remarked in that cold, monotonous voice.

"What the fuck, Sasha?" Cassio hissed. "This is my office."

"Not anymore," Alexei retorted dryly.

"First you bring Brennan's beaten niece into my place and now you destroy my office."

I shrugged. "I'll write you a check."

Cassio gave me an incredulous look. It wasn't like he needed money.

"Is this about the girl?" Cassio demanded to know.

Yes, it was about a girl. Just not the one he thought.

Branka Russo. Alessio's little sister.

Cassio owed Alessio quite a few favors. They were part of the same gang, started together against Benito King and supported each other. If Cassio learned I was pining after Branka, he'd tell Alessio, and that fucker would try to come after me.

He'd never kill me, but I might lose all my chances with Branka if I murdered her brother.

Blyad!

The betrayal and hurt in Branka's eyes flitted through my mind, haunting me. The tight sensation in my chest grew and darkness spilled through me.

Control was slipping through my hands. Just like that day I watched my mother jump to her own death and there was nothing I could do or say to stop her. I had tried to remedy that ever since. Mia and Wynter were part of that. I failed Mia; I didn't want to fail Wynter.

But fuck, that look Branka gave me dug claws into me. I should have gone after her. Blyad, Blyad. Blyad! If Branka would only listen. I was losing control of the situation. Of her.

All she had to do was come to me when I ordered her. Simple. But nothing with Branka Russo was simple.

Fuck, everything was slipping. Nothing was going according to my plan.

I'd stalked her for years, kept tabs on her. Eliminated any boys that dared touch her. She'd been under my skin from that first kiss. Jesus, I was into hard core sex and her innocent kiss rattled me.

I'd dreamed about her for so long. That fucking promise to Vasili! I should murder my brother for making me vow to stay away. My hands shook as I contemplated how to find my way around the promise I gave him.

Of course, I made Branka promise me she'd wait for me. Although, I started to think Branka wasn't in this like I was.

"Sasha, are you fucking daydreaming or is this about the girl?"

My laugh held a dark note. "You have no fucking idea."

I straightened my cuffs and stepped out of the room to go check on Wynter Flemming. The figure skater. Jesus Christ! She was in bad shape.

It reminded me of Mia.

I failed Mia; I couldn't fail Wynter.

As far as I was concerned, the men that did that to Mia deserved the death I eventually bestowed on them. But first I let them sweat for a bit. Nothing like your own mind working against you. Knowing I was coming for you. I watched them day after day, week after week. With every creak in the floor, they thought death had come for them.

Until one day they were right. And I took pleasure in that death.

Eye for an eye, motherfuckers.

The only regret I had was that I misread Mia's depression. The expression on her face right before she died had been haunting me since.

"I can't," she whispered, her voice barely audible. "I can't live like this."

"It's only been a week." I tried hard to keep myself together. Not to let another similar situation cloud my judgment. But even as Mia stood there, I'd see my mother. The crazy look in her eyes. Desperation. Finality.

"Mia, give me the gun," I demanded, keeping my voice soft. "Then we can sit down and talk."

She didn't move. Her eyes were blank and I suspected she didn't see me. Didn't hear me.

Suddenly, I felt like that boy begging his mother to give me my baby sister. Helpless and scared.

"Mia, look at me," I ordered.

As if she was dreaming, her eyes shifted my way. Her pupils were dilated, overtaking the gray. She was gone. I knew she was. In her mind, she had left me. But every bone in my body rebelled against it.

"Please, Mia," I pleaded for the first time in a very long time. "Give me the gun. I can help you."

No emotion crossed her face. It was a blank slate.

"Tell them I love them." Her tone was resolute. Final. "Keep them safe. Branka… don't let him break her like he broke me and Alessio."

"We'll keep them safe together," I rasped, emotions burning through me like hot lava. I took another step towards her. She pressed the barrel of the gun harder against her temple.

Bang.

Her body crumbled to the floor, her eyes wide and blank, staring into nothing. And her face, for the first time since I've met her, was serene.

My phone beeped and the memory vanished from my mind.

It wasn’t something I liked to think about. I failed that day. Just like before.

I swiped the message open. A corner of my lips lifted. Branka wasn’t dressed like a knock-out because she had a date. She was attending her best friend’s exhibit.

“Good girl,” I murmured my praise and the anger inside me slowly subsided like the lunar tide on the full moon.

I stepped into the room where Wynter lay immobile.

I’d ensure this girl was okay, then I’d find a way to make Branka mine.

Without killing her beloved brother.

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Chapter Seventeen

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BRANKA

"I preferred your other place," I told him as we made our way through the underground garage and towards the elevators. Alessio had owned a penthouse in New York City for as long as I could remember. It was only recently that he acquired a new one.

He released a sardonic breath and put his phone back into his pocket.

"You haven't even seen it yet," he remarked dryly. "You can't judge the entire place by the underground garage."

My brother looked tired. And tense. It didn't take a genius to realize why. I saw him leave Autumn's exhibit earlier.

"What did you think of Autumn's exhibit?" I asked casually as he keyed in his code, then pushed the button to the top floor. He shrugged, but didn't answer. I'd bet my life that he bought out all the photos.

"Alessio." A smooth, deep voice came from behind us and I whirled around, coming face to face with… wow. For a moment, my mind blanked. The man before me was godlike. Thick, wavy, dark brown hair. Eyes the color of the deep blue sea and broad shoulders that filled out his suit.

And his sex appeal. Jesus Christ.

I was certain I could taste it in the air. Hands down, he might have been one of the most good-looking men I had ever met. Not rough and built like Sasha Nikolaev. My brows furrowed at the stupid comparison. Sasha was nothing. This guy was more suave and charismatic.

Yet, my heart didn't thunder like it did around the psychotic mobster.

"Killian," my brother greeted him. "Didn't know you had a place here too."

His one hand pushed into his suit pants.

“I don’t use it often.” His eyes came to me, studying me. His face was relaxed, but something sharp flared in his gaze. “Is this your baby sister?”

Did he just-

Oh, no. He did not.

Before Alessio could answer him, I opened my mouth. “First, I’m not little,” I snapped. “And I’m certainly not a baby.”

Amusement glowed in Killian’s eyes. “It’s usually how Alessio describes you. His baby sister.”

My eyebrows rose and I slowly turned to look at my brother. “Seriously?” I quipped, a blush staining my cheeks. I mean, I knew he considered me his baby sister but he couldn’t go around and describe me like that. I was in my mid-twenties for Pete’s sake.

Alessio’s arm came around me. “It’s hard to break the habit. You know I love you.”

I rolled my eyes but couldn’t keep the smile off my face. “Yeah, yeah.”

But I did. And without him, my life would have been hell. I loved him more than anything or anyone and I’d love to see him happy. He deserved it.

“Branka, meet Killian Brennan,” Alessio started the introductions. “Killian, my ‘*no longer a baby’* sister Branka Russo.”

A pink flush rose on my cheeks. I could feel it warming my face. Killian held out his hand and after a brief hesitation, I took it.

“Nice to meet you, Branka.”

The way he said my name, softly and slowly, like he was savoring the syllables had my face turning crimson. I bet this guy was all seduction. But the intensity in his eyes and the dangerous vibes coming off him didn’t escape me. He hid it and he hid it well.

Unlike Sasha Nikolaev who wore it all out for everyone to see.

I glanced down at where his hand still covered mine. No ink and something in my stupid heart sank.

“Likewise,” I muttered, irritated that I compared this hot specimen of a man to Sasha Nikolaev. Except, that the latter had a disturbing impact on me. Maybe I was certifiable because a scary, psychotic mobster appealed to me more than this suave hottie.

The elevator door dinged open and Alessio nudged me forward, while Killian remained behind. My eyes flickered to the mirror in the elevator,

and I caught my brother and Killian sharing a glance. A nod by the latter and as I turned around, Killian's gaze came back to me.

"See you around, Branka."

It almost sounded like a promise.

"YOU'LL HAVE your own code to use when you want to visit," Alessio told me as the elevator beeped and came to a stop. "Each elevator is private."

During his college years, Alessio spent a lot of time in New York City. Even afterwards. It made sense that he had a place here. His friends were here. Luciano. Cassio. Nico. Although it made zero sense to get another penthouse.

My brother gestured for me to step out first, and the moment I did, I found myself in a huge living room with sleek, modern furniture. Dark hardwood floors stretched everywhere I could see. My favorite part though was the entire wall on the south side that was made from glass and offered a magnificent view of New York City, overlooking the skyscrapers and the Hudson River.

"Okay, so maybe I spoke too soon," I murmured as I walked further into the apartment and tilted my head up. Glass banisters gave a view of the upper floor and a large chandelier that hung above our heads.

"I'm glad you approve," Alessio noted amused.

I shifted my head to find an open kitchen on the left side of the living area. A massive black marble eat-in table divided the two spaces.

"What did you do with that other penthouse?" I asked him, nearing the windows, to take in the view up close. It was then I noticed there was a terrace here too.

"Why? You want it?" he teased.

I shrugged, meeting his gaze in the reflection of the window.

"If you're giving it away," I mused.

His chuckle filled the air. "You can have them both."

I shifted, tilting my face up to my brother, gauging him. My sixth sense flared up, telling me there was something else Alessio wanted to tell me.

"Why do I get a sense there is something you're not telling me, Alessio?"

The corners of his lips twitched, but he didn’t smile.

“Because my baby sister is smart.” Anxiety crept up my spine. I kept waiting for him to continue. I knew there’d be a bomb to drop, but wasn’t quite prepared for his next words. “I want to give this to you as your wedding present.” I stared at him, my chest squeezing in a weird way. “It would be your safe haven, a place to go to when you want to be alone.”

“I hate being alone,” I croaked. It wasn’t something I usually openly admitted, but it was time to acknowledge the elephant in the room. Well, at least that one.

He pressed a kiss on my forehead. “I know. But I want you to have a corner just to yourself. To meet your friends. To do whatever you want.”

“So I should come here if my husband beats me?” My voice cracked. I took a deep breath, fear creeping its way through every single pore. All I wanted was to not fear the past ghosts. To be strong.

“Any man lays a finger on you and they’ll be dead before they lift it off your body.” Alessio’s voice was hoarse, tension rolling through him.

“You might have never had the talk with me, Alessio,” I said. “But I hate to tell you, my husband will have to touch me.”

“Please don’t remind me,” he grumbled and a corner of his lips lifted. “Please let me give you this as your wedding present.”

I swallowed as a tremor started in my hands.

“Why a wedding present?” I choked out, my voice strange to my own ears. It didn’t reflect the turmoil currently inside me. “You could give it to me as a Christmas gift or something.”

Alessio took my face between his hands, his eyes clashing with mine. There were so many shades of gray in his gaze, and I knew mine reflected the same. It was the only physical resemblance we shared. That and the scars we both hid.

“I want to keep you safe.”

I gulped. “You are.” I put my palms over his hands and squeezed. “I’m not fragile. I’m stronger than you give me credit for.”

A sardonic breath left him. “I know, my baby sister. But I also know how ruthless the men in our world are.”

“I have you,” I rasped.

“You’ll always have me.” His voice was slightly anguished. “There are only two things left on this Earth that can break me, baby sister. You and one other person.” Without a doubt, I knew he referred to Autumn. I wished

he’d trust me. I wished both he and Autumn would come clean and tell me what happened. I wanted to help them, see them happy. “But if shit happens to me, I’d never forgive myself for leaving you open and vulnerable. A marriage would secure your protection.”

“It didn’t work for Mother,” I pointed out. We all witnessed it. Marriage was the worst thing that could have happened to her. “What if–”

I couldn’t even finish it.

“I’d fucking kill any man who even thinks about hitting you,” he growled. “I meant what I said back at Mia’s grave. I vowed to protect you and I will.”

“Then why this marriage nonsense?” I questioned.

He let go and shoved his hand through his hair.

“I found out about a deal Father made,” he started slowly. “He used you as payment. I’m taking care of it. And him. But the truth is he piled up so many enemies that there’ll always be someone coming for us.”

The lump in my throat grew. “I-I don’t want to get married.”

“You get to pick a man,” he told me. “I’ve gone through the acceptable prospects.”

“They’ll only show you their best side,” I argued.

“Give me some credit,” he retorted dryly. I trusted my brother with my life. I didn’t trust other men with my life. “Nico Morrelli has done a detailed check on all of them. It left me with two prospects.”

I shook my head. “Out of all the men in this world?” I snickered, although my voice shook too much to be effective. “That doesn’t bode well for the rest of the women.”

He didn’t answer.

“I’m not weak,” I attempted again. “I can take care of myself.” He held my gaze and desperation slowly grew. It suffocated, swallowing me into the darkness. The familiar basement that I wanted to set on fire. “If your candidates are so great, why do I need this penthouse? And why in New York?”

He let out a tired sigh and guilt pierced my chest.

“One prospect lives in New York,” he replied. “He actually has a penthouse in this building. The other is closer to home in Montréal.”

I stiffened. The chiseled cheekbones and dark blue eyes, the wrong shade by the way, came to mind.

“Let me guess. Killian Brennan.” Alessio nodded and agitation shot through me. “We ran into him so he can check me out and see if I’m acceptable.” Suddenly, Killian’s good looks dimmed. Just slightly. “So it doesn’t matter to him *who* I am. Just that I look acceptable.”

“Before you attack him, getting to know you was one of Killian’s requirements,” Alessio jumped to his defense. “And that the choice was yours. He refused to marry you if you’re not onboard with it.”

Killian Brennan might have become my favorite mobster.

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Chapter Eighteen

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BRANKA

Central Africa.

Five months since I saw Sasha in New York City. Five months of frustration simmering inside me. My brother wanted me married. I'd rather not be, but I understood the reasoning. For the hundredth time, I skimmed over the same profile.

Killian Brennan.

He was hot. Dark hair. Blue eyes. Irish. One sister. Decent family. Yet, I couldn't help but compare him to Satan's spawn with pale blue eyes. Sasha and Killian couldn't be more different, but maybe that was the point.

The other candidate was a hard pass for me. Alessio's right hand man, Ricardo. I'd known him way too long, and while I trusted him, I felt more brotherly affection towards him than anything else.

I shook my head. This was ridiculous. Most girls planned for vacations or dates. Not arranged marriages. Maybe my date tonight would have swept me off my feet. Oh, if only I had gone. But I wasn't in the mood, and somehow it seemed like a moot point, considering the arranged marriage that loomed over my head.

With a sigh, I typed up a quick message to my brother. ***I'm not planning the wedding. Yes to marrying Killian.***

Simple, yet complicated.

It was Friday night and that was usually Autumn's and my movie night. Regardless of where we were. Right now, we were somewhere in the middle of the African continent. I hoped the generator held up.

I stretched my legs out, waiting for Autumn to finish tucking in Kol. She had been reading him a bedtime story for the past hour. Not sure what kind of story that was but she should really consider skipping a few pages.

My own book sat in my lap. Steamy, erotica romance with a touch of BDSM. Yeah, not a good thing to read when horny and single. I was all out of batteries for my *friend* and my hand was a poor substitute for it.

I glanced down and read another page, unable to resist. It was getting to a good part. A really good, steamy part. Yes, I was a glutton for punishment. I'd worry about my libido and need for sex afterwards.

"What are you doing here?" Lost in words and the amazing world where a man knew exactly how to bring pleasure, I startled when I heard Autumn's voice.

Lifting my eyes, I promptly rolled them. "Last I checked, I live here."

"But you have a date," she pointed out. "With…" She tried to remember the name. Unsuccessfully. "I'm drawing a blank."

I shrugged. "I was busy."

"Doing what?"

I tilted my head. "It's Friday and our movie night."

She looked at me like I had three heads. "So you canceled it?"

Lowering my head, I turned the page. "Yep."

I didn't have to look up to know there was disapproval on her face. "See, that's why you're single."

"I'm single because we are in the middle of Africa," I retorted dryly.

"You had a date. Today. In the middle of Africa."

I shrugged. "Wrong day." A frustrated breath left my best friend and I looked at her. "Are we watching a movie or not?"

She lowered herself on the seat next to us. We stayed in a little, hut-like home that had one common room, a very basic, dirt floor bathroom, and two bedrooms. Autumn shared hers with Kol and I had the other one.

Lowering herself next to me, she lifted her legs, then propped them on the table with a sigh of relief. She wore khaki cargo pants and a black t-shirt with socks that each had a word on the soles of them - FUCK OFF.

I always gave the best gifts.

"Movie, and I have some editing on my pictures to do," she said. She looked tired. I should have offered to help her with Kol, but I knew how much she loved the bedtime routine with him. "Any particular movie you're in the mood for?"

I shook my head. It would seem neither one of us would be giving the movie our full attention.

She pressed play and *Die Hard* came on. *Perfect, it fits my mood.* Ever since I saw Sasha with that preppy blonde, I made a point of watching action movies. But I couldn't give up my romance novels.

A lady needed some pleasure in her life.

A soft light flooded from the lamp and the TV. Autumn opened her laptop and I reached for my phone. She sent me a few edited photos earlier and I hadn't had a chance to post them on our Instagram.

I picked the one I liked the best, then uploaded it. With the poor satellite signal, it would take only twenty minutes or so for it to load.

"Autumn?" My voice was quiet.

"Yeah?"

"Do you believe in second chances?"

Her body stiffened, and pain flickered in her expression. I wasn't sure whether I was asking for her or myself.

"Sometimes," she finally responded with hesitancy.

"Would you give Kol's father another chance?" She lowered her head, but the glow of her laptop couldn't hide the anger that rose to her cheeks.

"Why are we talking about me when it's you who skips a date, then complains about being single?" She turned it around back to me.

I focused on the movie, ignoring her. My chest tightened every time I thought about that day. I didn't know what to think about the whole thing with Sasha Nikolaev. It wasn't as if I was in love with him. But I enjoyed his touch. That was a novelty. After what I had endured under my father's brutality, I didn't care for men touching me. But with that man I actually craved it.

Not that it mattered anymore. I just sent a text and committed myself to Killian Brennan. I might be the daughter of a sinner, but I wouldn't be one. Killian was clear about fidelity - he didn't believe in cheating. It made me like him even more.

Done with thoughts wrapped around Killian or Sasha, I focused on my best friend.

"Have you ever slept with a man twice your age?" I asked her, my lips curving with a mischievous smile.

Her cheeks blushed, but she refused to answer.

“Oh my gosh, you have!” After all, my brother was significantly older than us.

She shook her head.

“No, I haven’t.” If my suspicion was correct, and I believe it was, it was pretty damn close. “You?” she asked me.

Considering I was still a damn virgin, the answer was easy. “No.”

“Fooled around?”

“Hmm.” I pursed my lips. I had looked up Sasha Nikolaev the moment he left me with a promise to wait for him. He was close to my brother’s age. “That would be a yes.”

Autumn’s sparkling gaze came up to me and the next second our laughter filled the room. Slightly bitter. A lot disgruntled.

Then, without warning, thunder rolled through the sky and raindrops hit against the window, making its way down the windowpane.

Somehow it reflected what I felt inside.

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Chapter Nineteen

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SASHA

For the past six months that little fleeting moment played in my mind. Over and over again.

It was not how I imagined my reunion with Branka. I didn't even know she was in New York City. Not the best timing considering the whole shitty thing that happened with Wynter. And I couldn't leave a battered woman and go after Branka.

Although my black heart totally demanded it. Those soft full lips and flush on her porcelain skin. The girl fascinated me. Her strength. Her determination. Fucking everything.

But it was her voice I missed the most. That soft, warm voice that soaked through my skin. It sent blood rushing through my veins and straight to my groin. The moment our gazes caught, time lagged in slow motion. Anger flashed in her gray eyes, like two thunderbolts ready to strike.

That got me even harder for her. The fact that I still hadn't killed her father or possibly even my brother for making that stupid promise was a miracle. I must be going for fucking sainthood.

Jesus Christ.

So I stood and watched her graceful back as she walked away from me, each step taking her further and further away.

Goddamn it!

Every fucking muscle in my body demanded I go after her. Like an instinct and I had to fight it. I had been waiting a long time. Seven years to be exact. Ever since the kiss in that bar. Seven years of biding my time and waiting for her to come into her own. Waiting for her father's death.

I always hoped it'd be me putting a bullet into his measly little brain.

But as I watched Alessio's dark expression, I relished in the fact that the day had finally come.

I waited patiently for him to have enough. Even intercepted a few of the old man shipments myself over the past four years. I liked fucking with the sadist. Besides, it passed the time when I was fucking bored and stalking Branka.

"I want him gone as soon as possible," Alessio demanded. It was early November. Maybe the guy didn't want to spend another holiday with the old man, not that I could blame him.

Alessio must be a saint because if it was me, I'd have had the old man killed decades ago. But the day had finally come. The tipping point was his old man attempting to sell Branka. For a fucking shipment. Like she was a goddamn object.

Fucker.

Alessio, Vasili, Alexei, and I sat around the table in my big brother's office.

New Orleans in November was hit or miss. With hurricane season behind us, the temperatures were still warm and there were no tourists. The holiday decorations had already started to appear throughout downtown.

The city skyline stretched through the window of Vasili's office. Even from here, you could see the city buzzing with life. It was what made this city unique.

"Can you do it?" Alessio asked.

"Yes." Of course I could do it. If I wanted to shoot down a president, I could do it.

"Good. I'll pay anything." I believed him. Alessio would kill himself if it meant protecting his sister. He and Vasili weren't that much different in that aspect. "Half now and half when the job is complete."

"I want your sister." The words slipped out. Vasili was all for strategizing. I had no time for bullshit.

Judging by Vasili's and Alessio's expressions, I caught them both by surprise. Alexei's face was expressionless. He was really good at hiding whatever was on his mind.

"That's not possible." Alessio's words came through clenched teeth. A vein in his temple throbbed and he looked like he fought the urge to kill me. Lookey, lookey, Vasili and Alessio had something in common.

“Why not?” I asked, pulling a wrapper out of my pocket.

“Because Branka has chosen her own man,” he gritted. *The hell she has,* I thought to myself. Branka and I would need to have a talk.

Tatiana walked into the room at that moment, unsteady on her feet. She wore a short, black dress and black glasses that probably hid red rimmed eyes. She’d been drinking a lot. And crying even more.

Ever since Adrian, Tatiana’s other half, died in a car explosion, she had been in shambles. Unfortunately, leads on the culprit were slim to none. Adrian worked on something off the books and his death left us without any leads. Tatiana wanted to see someone pay. Vasili, Alexei, and I tried to find leads. Any fucking leads, but we kept coming up empty handed.

“Brothers,” she slurred, confirming my suspicion she was drunk. Her head turned to Alessio. “And not a brother.”

I stood up and walked over to my sister. “Hey, trouble. How about I have someone take you home so you can rest?”

She laughed. The bitter kind of laugh. I couldn’t blame her. Everywhere she looked, there were happy faces. Our friends started their families. They found their happiness. And she lost hers. She couldn’t even get comfort in raising her children because for some reason Adrian and Tatiana wanted to wait before starting their family.

And now, the chance was taken from them.

“I can’t sleep there,” she rasped, her words barely a whisper.

“Go to my place,” Vasili offered. Except that was worse for Tatiana than going to her own place where she used to be happy with Adrian. She had a front row seat to what her life could have been if Adrian had lived.

She shook her head. No surprise there.

“Go to my penthouse,” I instructed her. I was barely ever home, and when I was in New Orleans, more often than not, I spent time in Vasili’s compound.

“Will I run into one of your freak women there?” she grumbled.

I rolled my eyes. My family thought of me like some sort of man whore. “No. The place is empty.”

She muttered something unintelligible, then turned on her heel and left the room.

“This is getting out of hand,” Vasili grumbled. “She can’t spend her days drunk as a sailor.”

“She’ll come around,” I told him. “Let her grieve in her own way.”

“By letting her kill herself with vodka?” he sneered. “That is certainly sound advice. Why didn’t I think of that?”

“Because you’re not as smart as me,” I told him, sitting down into my seat and stretching my legs in front of me.

“Sasha, it’s been a year since the accident,” Vasili grumbled. “It’s time for Tatiana to move on. She can’t mourn Adrian for the rest of her life. She has her whole life ahead of her.”

“Agreed. But the more you push her, the more she’ll fight you. She’ll move on, just let her do it her own way.” He knew I was right. It was written all over his expression. “Just think of Isabella. How would you feel if it was Isabella in that accident?” My brother’s growl was my answer. You’d think he was a fucking wolf, not a human. “Well, Tatiana loved Adrian just as much.”

He ran a hand through his hair.

“I guess I hoped her love was a bit less intense,” he bit out, then a string of curses left his mouth. “This fucking obsession running through Nikolaev’s veins will end up being our downfall.”

Vasili might have a point. Obsession was our mother’s downfall. Our father’s obsession had him chasing his mistress for years, ignoring his children.

Love was passion. Obsession. Something, once we Nikolaevs found, we couldn’t live without. It was our blessing and our curse.

“I’ve kept my eye on Tatiana,” I assured my brother. “She’s taking small steps in the right direction.”

“Now, back to business. What does it mean exactly that Branka chose her own man?”

“None of your business,” Alessio hissed.

“Well, that’s my payment,” I told him coolly, while bitterness bit into my chest. The world had no idea how goddamn crazy I could be. Let them try and take her away from me.

“No.” Alessio was lucky to be Branka’s brother. It was the only reason I’d keep him alive. “Besides, she’s too young for you.”

Fuck age. It was just a number. Besides, he was the one to talk.

“Her friend is too young for you too,” I snickered. “Did that stop you?”

“I told you before, Sasha. My sister is not on the table. So either name another price or I’ll go find another sniper.”

“Good luck finding one that’s as good as me,” I retorted dryly.

One way or another, his sister would be mine.

THREE DAYS LATER, I sat in the shadows of Montréal, waiting for the old Russo.

Alessio refused to share any details about Branka and whatever man she chose. Stubborn motherfucker. I wouldn't budge on the payment. I didn't need his money. Branka was the only form of payment accepted. Vasili attempted to talk both of us down, but I tuned it all out. I'd consider my payment only in the form of a very specific woman.

But I'd kill his father. Not for him. For Branka. Because the fucker thought he could trade my woman as if she were cattle.

Supposedly, he found someone else. Fucker! No matter though, I didn't trust anyone else. There was no one better than me. I'd handle the old fucker and ensure he got a bullet between his eyes.

So I found myself back in Montréal. At the old Russo's manor.

I remembered all the stories Mia shared of the shit that happened here. It made me want to bomb the whole fucking place to ashes. But that wouldn't be a quiet in and out job.

But it'd feel so fucking good. The only reason Branka's father didn't get a bullet in his head four years ago was because of my brother and Tatiana. If the repercussions were only on me, I would have gambled and killed him.

I set my equipment up on top of the red brick building. It was almost déjà vu. Except this time, there'd be nothing saving the old fucker from me. Once the set up was finished, I sat and waited for the perfect hit.

The view of Lake Ontario stretched for miles. The old man really got himself some prime real estate here, yet all I saw when I looked at this shithole were images of Mia painted in my head.

The way her father tortured her. The image of her own mother attempting to kill her children and herself in a fire. Maybe it was the reason Mia and I got along so well. We had more in common than most people.

I looked through the scope, watched and waited. That was all I could do for now.

Wait. Watch. And wait some more.

Hours passed. The light faded. Not that it was late in the day. November days were short. Especially as far north as Montréal. It was freeze-your-balls-country if you asked me. Yes, I was Russian by heritage, but I preferred the New Orleans climate to this. So did Alexei. He hated the cold even more than me.

The lights came on and lit up the compound. The manor looked almost dream-like, except I knew what nightmares Mia endured under that roof. Her little sister too.

A car appeared down the long, curvy driveway. My lips curved into a smile and a feeling of disappointment washed over me. This would be too easy.

It was then that I saw it. The other sniper. On top of the Russo manor. I shifted the scope and saw him. Royce motherfucking Ashford.

He saw me at the same time. And flipped me the goddamn finger. Fucking prick.

“Oh no, you won’t,” I hissed.

A limo, with bulletproof windows, drifted down the driveway until it came to a stop in front of two white columns. The driver climbed out and came around to open the door to the back of the limo.

Ignoring Royce, I returned my scope back to the target.

Blood rushed through my veins. The adrenaline fed it but my hands didn’t tremble. I was used to this feeling and I thrived on it. The only feeling that ever came close to it was sex. But not just any kind of sex.

I focused and watched Branka’s father step out of the car. He slowly made his way up the grand staircase.

One second. Two seconds. *Bang.*

A clean shot. Straight through his black heart.

Royce’s shot came a second later. The old Russo started to crumble on the steps, only a couple of steps from his entrance. I pulled a trigger again. This one hit him straight in the forehead, between his eyes.

“Bullseye,” I muttered, satisfied with my aim. “We don’t want you rising from the dead, fucker.”

Grinning, I flipped Royce the bird. “Can’t compete with greatness,” I said to the wind, hoping it traveled Royce’s way.

There’d be no resurrecting him.

My phone beeped. Unknown number. ***This is my job. Did you notice it took you two shots to my one to kill the fucker?***

My text back had rows of middle finger emojis. Then I shoved the phone into my pocket.

“For Mia and my woman,” I murmured as I started to disassemble my rifle. I stored it away, and made my way off the building.

The old Russo’s time had run out. Darkness was his new best friend. He’d be six feet under. Where he belonged. I wanted to dance over his grave.

There’d be nobody and nothing stopping me now.

Branka Russo would be mine.

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Chapter Twenty

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BRANKA

A heavy knock sounded at the door.

I sighed.

I wasn't in the mood for company. Exhaustion pulled on my bones. My father's funeral wasn't particularly sad nor upsetting but the knowledge that the wedding with Killian would be set freaked me out a bit.

Fully expecting my brother at the door, I went to open it with a big, fake smile on my face. Alessio had a strange notion of privacy. He expected everyone to knock and never enter his space without permission. I suspected it had something to do with the shit our father put him through.

Six months had gone by since New York City. My father was dead. Good riddance! The fucker was cruel and destroyed so many lives. I hoped he burned in hell for all eternity.

Sasha Nikolaev would be dead. For making me waste four years on a promise. A stupid goddamn promise.

Another knock. Heavier this time.

Steeling my spine, I pulled the door open, my eyes widened and my breath cut short. Sasha stood in front of me, his gaze filled with something dark and dangerous. It lowered, traveling over my body. I was in my black leggings and red sweater while he wore a white, dress shirt, dark blue tie, and gray suit pants.

My survival instinct kicked in and I tried to shut the door on him. His big hand pressed against the door, keeping it open.

"Get out," I hissed.

He grinned. He was handsome. In a predatory kind of way. He was hot. In a psychotic kind of way. And his smile, it was the unhinged kind of smile that promised hell.

“I don’t think so, kotyonok.” The nerve of this man. “You owe me something.”

I glared at him.

“The only thing I owe you is a broken nose.” I attempted again to shove the door closed. His foot blocked it. “My brother will kill you.” My voice shook from anger or something else, I wasn’t certain.

“Both of us know, your brother is busy banging your friend right now.”

I shook my head despite the fact I knew he was right. “I’ll scream. His men will kill you.”

He took a step forward, I took a step back. “We both know they won’t kill me. But I might kill them.”

See, this was what happened when you played with fire. You got burnt. Or in this case, you end up on Sasha Nikolaev’s radar. Which was probably worse.

He took another step forward and I mirrored one backwards. He shut the door, his eyes hot enough to set my skin on fire.

“You and I need to talk. About your choice of a husband.” His tone was dark, almost threatening.

“There’s nothing to talk about,” I breathed.

His gaze flashed with something sardonic. Threatening. Unhinged. “There’s plenty to talk about. We can start with a promise you made.”

I swallowed. “That promise is null and void.”

I was so goddamn stupid to make that promise to him.

A dark chuckle vibrated through the room. Ominous and threatening. “Only if you want death on your hands,” he whispered, darkness lacing his voice as he continued stalking towards me. I couldn’t decide who the threat was aimed at. Me or someone else.

My back hit the bedroom wall.

“Do you want to have another man’s blood on your hands?” he asked.

“Only yours,” I rasped, proving I had no brain.

He pressed his hands against the wall on either side of me.

“I’ll bleed for you.” The rasp of his voice brought goosebumps to my skin as a shiver rolled down my spine. His lips skimmed up my neck. “I’ll

kill for you.” I sucked in a breath as he bit the sensitive skin where my neck and jaw met. “But nobody else will have you.”

I shivered.

“I’ve waited seven years. You’re *mine*.” He pressed his mouth against my ear.

"No, I've waited for seven years," I claimed with a conviction that was quickly waning. "You were strutting around the world with an Olympic figure skater while I waited. I waited and you never came back. Well, the wait is over for me. I chose someone else.”

“Are you jealous?” It didn’t escape me that he ignored my jab at him. Instead, he dared to ask *me* if I was jealous.

“Each time I turned on the television, it was a smack in my face,” I spat out, a tinge of bitterness ringing in my voice. “I don’t need that shit, and I certainly don’t need you and your broken promises.”

“There’s nothing for you to worry about with Wynter,” he growled.

I shrugged. “It doesn’t matter anymore,” I told him. “Because I’m marrying someone else.”

A growl sounded between us. “Who is he?” He demanded to know, a hint of threat weaving in the darkness of his voice. I pressed my lips together. There was no way in hell I’d give him Killian’s name.

My breathing was erratic. My heart hammered hard, threatening to crack my ribs.

“It’s none of your business.”

The words would be more convincing if my lips weren’t parted and my body wasn’t rubbing against his. He smelled so good. Too good. Too tempting. His body heat ignited every inch of me and my heartbeat throbbed between my legs.

“All of it is my business.”

Desire hazed my vision as I watched him through half-lidded eyes. He was just as I remembered him. Built like a brick wall with an appearance of a gentleman but every single inch of him was savage. He moved with the grace of a panther and the viciousness of a bear. He reeked of ruthlessness and danger. It was in the shadows that lurked in his eyes and in the way the black ink decorated his fingers. But most of all, it was in the way he watched me. I held his gaze, but with each second that ticked, the stakes became higher. It was like a game of Russian roulette. The irony wasn’t lost on me as I stared at the Russian before me.

My breathing was erratic, as his hands slid down my waist, my hips, skimming the outsides of my thighs. Heat sizzled in my veins, tightening in my breasts

But then I remembered the last time I saw him and instantly all the heat evaporated.

I'd be nobody's play thing.

He raised two fingers and pressed them against my lips.

"Suck."

My body and my reason battled. I wanted to drown in a pool of lust with him but my reason demanded retribution. I wanted him to feel bitterness like I had. Every piece of information I found on Sasha and Wynter Flemming iced my veins and my heart.

I drew his fingers into my mouth and I waited for the right moment. His gaze darkened and satisfaction filled his expression. I stared at his beautiful face. The nose ring and the thin scar on the bottom of his lip made him appear even more brutal, but none of it compared to those eyes. The eyes that could freeze and melt ice, depending on his mood.

Before I'd fall under his spell, I bit into his fingers with all my strength.

"What the fuck–"

I reached for the knife I always kept on me and pointed it at his neck. Just the way he taught me. Surprise flashed in his gaze and then his eyes narrowed.

"Well look at that," I purred. "The student mastered the teacher."

He didn't look upset. If anything, he seemed impressed.

"You going to stab me, kotyonok?" Pressing the blade against his skin, I nicked his skin and watched blood trickle down his inked skin. "Little girls shouldn't play with knives," he drawled.

A viscous grin appeared on my face. "Good thing, I'm not a little girl."

He didn't look scared at all. His mistake.

"You're going to kill me, kotyonok?" he mused. "Better not delay, because I'm taking you home."

I couldn't stab him in the heart. Nor slice his throat. Something about hurting him didn't sit well with me, but he wouldn't be telling me what to do either.

So I kicked him in his balls with all my strength. He hunched over and I slid past him, bolting out the door.

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Chapter Twenty-One

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SASHA

My little kotyonok grew up.

Despite the pain in my groin, I couldn't help but be proud. I had to leave Alessio's manor or risk getting caught. The surveillance was already wiped out, so the only one who'd know I was there was Branka.

My savage little woman.

If she thought that little performance would dissuade me from pursuing her, she had another thing coming. If anything else, I wanted her even more. She'd marry me, not some wimpy little ass.

Blyad! Fuck!

I had to get my hand on that name so I could eliminate the guy.

Back at the hotel, I studied the nick on my neck from Branka's blade. I still couldn't believe my little savage. My lips curved up into a smile despite the ache in my balls. It was probably payback for laughing my head off when I heard how Sailor kicked Raphael in the balls. It was the highlight of his wedding.

The door of my hotel room swung open and Vasili strode in like a goddamn giant.

"By all means, come on in," I grumbled. "See me naked. It's a glorious sight."

"I doubt it," he retorted dryly.

His pale eyes darted my way. Lucky for him, I wasn't naked. But still, he should learn some privacy rules. Don't enter a hotel room uninvited. I could have had Branka here in my bed with me. If Vasili were to see her naked, I'd have to kill him.

“We are having dinner with Alessio, Luciano, and a few other men tomorrow. Alessio’s bringing in his future brother-in-law.”

What. The. Fuck!

“Moving fast, isn’t he?” I retorted coldly. There would be a wedding over my dead body. “Who’s the lucky groom?”

Fuck, it just about killed me to say the word.

Vasili shrugged. “Don’t know.”

My goddamn brother only cared about his own wedding.

“Okay, when is the wedding?”

He shrugged again and an angry red mist coated my vision. Was everyone adamant about keeping shit from me?

“You don’t know or don’t want to tell me?” I ground my teeth so hard, I thought I’d break my jaw.

Vasili watched me silently, shoving his hands into his pockets.

“I don’t know,” he finally answered. “Although I have to wonder why you care?”

I returned my attention to the mirror and disinfected the cut.

“Sasha.” Vasili’s voice held a note of warning.

“No reason,” I told him. “Text me the time and place for dinner tomorrow.”

Because I had a potential groom to kill.

THIS FUCKING DINNER WAS A BORE.

And Branka and her fucking man had yet to show up. I swear to God, if they didn’t show up soon, I’d burn this city to the ground.

Something about the way Autumn glared at me told me Branka might have shared some information with her. I grinned. That was a good sign, it meant she was just as obsessed with me as I was with her.

Autumn kept rambling on about the war in the Middle East, gun distribution and saving the fucking world. Right now, all I cared about was getting my hands on Branka, nothing else. I tried to tune her out, I really did, but she kept yapping and yapping.

“Jesus, this girl is worse than the tree huggers,” I muttered. “She’s going to save the world.”

Why couldn’t she just give me information on Branka? Goddamn it.

“Sasha–” Vasili and Alessio warned. But it would seem Branka’s best friend was way too mad to keep her fury at bay. Whatever! *Bring it on, Alessio’s woman.*

She took a threatening step towards me and I watched her amused. No wonder Branka liked her.

“One day, Sasha Nikolaev,” she hissed, shoving her little hand against my chest, “ – someone’s going to stab that black heart of yours. And I’m going to have a front row seat to it. And fucking popcorn.”

Jesus! This week had to be the time for savages.

“Are we still talking about gun distributions or something else?” Luciano grumbled. “I feel like something else is cooking.”

I couldn’t let them get wind of what was going on. Not until I got my hands on my woman.

“Well, we know Isabella’s not cooking,” I drawled, blowing a kiss to my sister-in-law who promptly just flipped me the bird.

“I really like the girl, Alessio,” Alexei deadpanned. Of course my brother would like her. Autumn Corbin had fire and fought for her convictions. Just like his own wife.

“Thanks,” she told him, smiling sweetly. Of course, she’d like every other man in this room but me. “Sasha, get some coaching from your brother. Because you’re a major ass.”

“Where is your reinforcement, Autumn?” I drawled lazily. “Did she leave you, the girl who wants to save the world, all alone for the wolves to eat?”

Was it wise to taunt the best friend of the woman I’d marry? No, it wasn’t. But I needed her to slip. Tell me where in the fuck Branka was. It infuriated me to think of her alone with another man. My eyes flickered to the entrance. I knew the door would ding when another guest walked in, but I couldn’t help it.

Autumn glanced back to Alessio then returned her attention to me. I didn’t like the smugness in her expression at all. When she took a step forward, I knew I wouldn’t like the next words that came out of her mouth.

“Actually, Branka and her *boyfriend* are spending some time alone,” she said in a low voice. It was my turn to glare at her. Branka and her boyfriend would not spend much time alone if I can fucking help it. “They are getting *acquainted*,” she added sweetly.

Over. My. Dead. Fucking. Body.

Branka wouldn’t get acquainted with anyone.

Without another word to her or anyone in the group, I stormed out of the restaurant.

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Chapter Twenty-Two

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BRANKA

I watched Killian light a cigarette, the angry red glow staring at me.

Initially, I thought it was a good idea to take some time and have dinner on our own. So we could get to know each other. Now I wasn't so sure.

We've texted back and forth over the last month or so. That was easier than this. Awkward silence was non-existent via text. In person, not so much.

"So what does a social blogger do?" Killian asked casually.

"What does an Irish mobster do?" I retorted back and his lips tugged up. He wouldn't answer, I knew he wouldn't, but I couldn't resist.

Killian Brennan was a man of few words. I liked him; I really did. But I couldn't help but notice how he watched me like I was a damsel in distress. Unlike another set of pale blue eyes that watched me… well, differently.

"Have you decided on the wedding date?" Killian questioned instead. Truthfully, I hadn't even thought about it. I'd been dragging my feet on the whole charade.

At least he was likable. Everything about him screamed wealth and his sex appeal was so potent I could taste it. So could every single woman in this restaurant because they all stared at him.

He was handsome, but very different from Sasha. Killian was younger but no less lethal. Thick, dark, wavy hair. Cheekbones that could chisel stone. His dark blue eyes whispered about darkness and sins that most of the men in the underworld possessed.

"I don't want a winter wedding," I answered instead.

He nodded. “Summer then?”

“Sure.” I smoothed my hand over the tablecloth to hide how much the idea of marrying him rattled me. “You don’t strike me as a smoker,” I remarked for no apparent reason. I didn’t want another stretch of silence to grow too heavy.

His blue eyes met mine. Against his dark hair, they were striking. The wrong shade of blue, but no less devastating than the other set. It seemed the color blue would forever be compared to the pale blue eyes of a certain psychotic mobster.

He blew out a breath of smoke.

“Does it bother you?” He put his cigarette out before I could reply.

“My brother smokes sometimes.” This was so stupid. No man rattled me like Sasha Nikolaev. Killian wasn’t making me nervous, yet I couldn’t slow down my heartbeat. “It doesn’t bother me.”

He nodded, but he didn’t light up another cigarette. Truthfully, I didn’t particularly like the smell of smoke. I understood why Alessio smoked. He only did it when he was worried about something. Usually me. And now Autumn.

I cleared my throat, searching desperately for another topic. “Do you smoke a lot?”

Before I agreed to marry him, I researched Killian. His smoking habit didn’t come up. Not that it was a deal breaker.

“Not really.”

I sighed and picked up my fork, then resumed pushing food around my plate. I wasn’t hungry, but at least it was doing something rather than sitting here in silence.

“My cousin is going through some shit.” His words had me searching out his eyes. “It’s worrying me.”

“Ah.” So he was very much like Alessio. “Anything I can help with?” I offered.

He shook his head. “No. She just has to get through the Olympics and she’ll be fine.”

My eyebrows shot up. “Wow, Olympics?”

“Yeah. Figure skating.” His eyes found mine. His face was relaxed with an indecipherable expression etched on his perfect features. Suddenly, I got the sense that Killian was a man of many secrets. “Wynter Flemming is my cousin.”

My spine stiffened, but I kept my expression blank. Wynter Flemming was Killian's cousin? What. The. Fuck!

The background check I got on Killian was apparently shit. An audio played in my mind. *Be the bigger person. She doesn't matter.* But my blood boiled and I wanted to shout out, "*Fuck bigger person. Give me your cousin's number. I'm gonna go kill her*." Man, that would go over well.

"Oh." Then realizing I sounded more disappointed than excited, I added, "Wow."

He chuckled. "You don't sound impressed."

I forced a smile to my face, although I had to wonder if it didn't come out more sour than anything.

"I'm not much into sports," I admitted. It was a true statement, although it wasn't exactly the reason for my sour expression.

"That's okay." He straightened his suit sleeve with an indecipherable expression on his face. "I'm definitely not into figure skating."

"Are you two close?" I asked. "Or is she closer with your sister?"

The corner of Killian's mouth tugged up. "Yes, with both Wynter and my sister, Juliette." If his expression was anything to go by, he was very close to them. "They are trouble, both of them," he added.

This time I smiled too. "Alessio often called Autumn and me troublemakers."

"Did you rob your enemies?" he asked. I shook my head. "Well, those two did."

Oh, okay. Autumn and I needed to up our game.

"Maybe you should increase their allowance," I suggested jokingly.

"To half a million a month?" When my eyes widened, he explained, "They robbed three places in about a month."

My phone beeped and I retrieved it from my purse. It was a message from Autumn. I slid it open and read the message.

Sasha just stormed out.

"Everything okay?" Killian asked.

I met his blue piercing gaze. "Yes, just a message from Autumn asking if we are still coming." I smiled, hoping to hide my lie behind the smile. "She's eager to meet you."

A half-smile touched Killian's mouth. If he was handsome when he was serious, he was downright gorgeous when he smiled.

He stood up and extended his hand.

“What are we waiting for then?”

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Chapter Twenty-Three

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SASHA

I sat in my hotel room with an unlit cigarette in my hand.

My whole body buzzed with the need to fight, kill, or just beat some poor schmuck and get this frustration out. I was one of the best killers on this goddamn planet, and I couldn't find a woman in the same city.

My muscles tightened, revolting at the images that played in my mind. I'd already decided I'd kill the motherfucker who touched her.

I fucking hated people touching what was mine. And the thought of another man or a woman hearing Branka's moans was enough to send me into a fucking rage.

A visceral, violent type of rage.

Fuck Vasili and the promise he wrung out of me. I should have just killed Branka's father years ago and taken her for mine. Who in their right mind could stop me? Fucking nobody!

Her nails belonged on my skin. Her moans belonged to me. And her pussy definitely belonged to me. Yeah, the girl didn't know it. But she would. Very soon. The need to have her raged inside me, hot and unrelenting. It was probably the fallout from such a long goddamn abstinence.

Where was she? Was he touching her? Was she moaning his name?

That alone was enough to snap my control and turn my blood to fire. Her soft moans as I remembered them played on repeat in my mind. The anger burned so strong it stole my fucking breath. I'd lost it. I stood up to my full height and sent the coffee table flying through the room. It smashed through the window and disappeared from my sight. The sound of

shattering glass was barely audible through the buzzing in my ear. The bed followed. Then the sofa.

“What the fuck is going on here?” Vasili’s voice penetrated the red haze suffocating my brain.

His eyes traveled over the room and now that some sanity returned, I followed his gaze. I’d destroyed every goddamn piece of furniture in the room. The little mini-bar was shattered, the glass scattered across the floor and the scent of alcohol filling the room.

“I’m re-decorating,” I answered in a calm voice.

He gave me an incredulous look, then returned his attention to the destroyed room. “You’re decorating a fucking hotel room?”

“It needed improvement,” I told him calmly, standing in the midst of a room that looked like it had undergone a demo project.

“I’d recommend not quitting your day job,” he said dryly. “Your decorating skills suck.”

I flipped him the bird, turned on my heel, and headed out.

My brother’s hand wrapped around my forearm. “What the fuck is going on with you?”

“Nothing.”

His eyes traveled around the room.

“Yeah, it looks like nothing,” he muttered sarcastically. “What did you and Autumn talk about back at the restaurant?” he demanded to know.

“Sucky weather in Canada.” His vein pulsed, his anger rose, and I held his gaze. Honestly, I wouldn’t mind sparring with him now. It’d blow off some of this steam.

“Goddamn it, Sasha. Tell me you kept your promise and kept away from Alessio’s sister.”

A sardonic breath left me. It was that stupid promise that had me losing the fucking control over the situation.

“I kept the stupid promise, Brat.” Brother.

“What the fuck is going on between you and Alessio’s woman?” He studied me, his expression exasperated. “Tell me you don’t have a hard on for Alessio’s woman. That won’t go well.”

I scoffed. He got it so fucking wrong. They always got it all wrong. Although something about the way Vasili watched me told me he was onto me.

“There is nothing between me and Alessio’s woman.”

Only his sister.

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Chapter Twenty-Four

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BRANKA

I broke at least five traffic laws.

Cameras flashed capturing the tag number and I grinned. It was my brother's car so I wouldn't be paying the ticket.

"Are you sure this is a good idea?" I questioned Autumn for the tenth time since I picked her up. "It sounds too dangerous and reckless."

"Yes," she assured. "I'll be in and out."

My gaze flicked her way, dry and sarcastic. "Famous last words." She just rolled her eyes as she dug through her shit, probably searching for her passport. "So back to your comment about being into rough stuff."

When Autumn called me asking for a ride to the airport, she casually dropped an idea. That maybe Sasha's remark about me not being ready had something to do with his sexual preferences.

Autumn's cheeks stained crimson. God, I didn't want to know what she and my brother did last night. It was obviously unsuitable for virgin ears.

"It just dawned on me that maybe he was… you know… into rough stuff."

"Like BDSM?" I asked curiously.

"Yeah, or rough shit," she murmured, turning even redder.

I came to a red light and looked out the window pensively. He never gave me any inclination that he was into rough sex and certainly not into BDSM. Well, except he did spank my ass that first time he made me orgasm. Maybe that was a preview?

My thighs quivered and heat bloomed in my stomach, moving lower and lower. It made me squeeze my thighs together to ease the ache. God,

why couldn’t my body react like this for Killian? Instead, all my pussy cared about was Sasha goddamn Nikolaev.

“That would be problematic,” I murmured more to myself. The fear of getting tied up and abused stemmed back to my worst nightmares. There was more to the whole BDSM thing than just submission and getting tied up, but my mind blanked at just the thought of it and my heart rate went into overdrive.

“You and Alessio–” I started, at this point I was certain every inch of Autumn’s body was blushing. Not red, but fucking maroon. “Actually, never mind. I don’t want to know.”

“He’s not into that stuff,” she muttered quickly.

He must be into some of it if she was turning so beet red. Good God, I kind of wanted to know but then I really didn’t. There was definitely such a thing as too much information.

“I just want you to be happy, Branka,” Autumn said, putting her hand on my elbow. “Killian’s hot and he seems nice. But I don’t see you getting all worked up over him.”

“We have an agreement.”

“Fuck the agreement,” she spat frustratedly. “I want to see that fire in your eyes. Like when you said you’d carve Sasha’s heart out. You felt so strong about him to actually want to carve his heart out. I don’t see that spark with Killian.”

A frustrated breath left me.

“I’ve known Sasha a lot longer,” I sighed. “Besides, it would reflect poorly on Alessio if I broke the agreement now.”

“I love your brother,” she croaked. “I really do. But I want you to be happy. Fuck the agreement and all that bullshit. This is your life we’re talking about.”

Yes, it was my life, but I had no intentions of starting a war for a man that couldn’t even keep his promise.

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Chapter Twenty-Five

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BRANKA

Three weeks since I dropped Autumn off at the airport.

And I regretted it every goddamn day. Every time I looked into my brother's eyes, my nephew's eyes, and every time I saw Autumn's parents.

Autumn was stuck in Afghanistan. *Alive*, we hoped. Except ever since the footage showing her getting in front of a gun and another woman, we hadn't heard a peep.

I watched Byron and Royce Ashford walk out of Alessio's office with grim expressions on their faces. Byron's eyes flicked my way and I froze. Byron's expression reminded me of Alessio and for a moment, I stood, staring after them.

How did I never see the resemblance before? I wondered.

"Wait," I called out to them, just as they were leaving through the front foyer.

Placing Kol on my hip, I hurried to them, worried they'd get tired of waiting for me. I still couldn't understand why the powerful Billionaire Kings were helping us. They didn't need us, unless Alessio was holding something over their heads.

Byron and Royce faced me with lethal grace. The way they carried themselves spoke of power and ruthlessness. Maybe not on the level of Alessio and his friends, but I had no doubt the Billionaire Kings were used to getting their way.

One way or another.

They both waited, neither one of them speaking but their eyes sharp on me.

“Why are you helping us?” I demanded to know.

No answer.

Kol tried to reach out for Byron and Royce with his hands, the little traitor. Both men took one hand each, their big hands surprisingly gentle and their eyes on little Kol. He was good at capturing hearts, just like his Maman.

My throat squeezed and my heart ached. I needed Autumn to make it back safe. For my brother. For me.

“You look a lot like my brother,” I croaked. Byron’s eyes landed on me. He looked like my brother but his eyes were a different color. My gaze flickered to Royce. He had dark eyes, but the resemblance was there. “Why is that?” I demanded to know.

Byron’s cold eyes studied me, probably seeing too much.

“That is something you’ll have to talk to Alessio about, Miss Russo,” he drawled. Byron’s knuckles softly brushed over Kol’s chubby cheeks. “See you later, Kol.”

And just like that, they both left.

Men!

I whirled around and with rushed steps headed for Alessio’s office. He hadn’t stepped foot in his penthouse in downtown Montréal. He considered it his and Autumn’s place. Probably too many memories there for him to handle it.

I found my brother sitting behind his desk, his elbows resting against the wood, his forehead pressed to his hands and his fingers gripping his hair. The vise around my heart squeezed and tears burned the backs of my eyes.

Alessio deserved Autumn. He deserved love and happiness in his life. He deserved a full family.

“Brother,” I rasped, emotions thick in my voice. He lifted his head, heavy fatigue behind his eyes.

“Daddy,” Kol babbled, reaching for him. The love in Alessio’s eyes burned strong for his son. He’d protect his son at the cost of his own life. The volatile look in his eyes promised retribution for anyone who’d dare to think about hurting his son or his woman.

And the unfamiliar feeling creeped through my chest. *Longing.* The need to be loved.

Alessio leaned back into his chair and I took Kol to sit with his father. He took him and sat him on his lap, reaching into the drawer and pulling out crayons. He had shit ready for Kol in every room. He'd be a good father. He *was* a good father.

"Daddy," Kol beamed, grabbing the paper, then crayon. "I draw planes."

Alessio smiled. "Yeah, buddy. Draw me planes. Big ones."

Kol's attention on drawing, Alessio's eyes returned to me. "You good, Branka?"

I nodded, wrapping my fingers around the wrist that throbbed. The physical scars healed, but I still remembered the pain of the broken wrist.

Breathe in. Breathe out.

I lowered myself in the chair across his desk.

"Yes. You?"

It was a stupid question. I could tell he wasn't okay. But I didn't know what to say, what to do. I felt helpless.

"I just have to find a way to bring her home," he muttered.

I agreed with the sentiment wholeheartedly.

"I wish I hadn't taken her to the airport," I told him with a heavy sigh.

He picked up a crayon and added something to Kol's drawing. "And I wish I hadn't left that morning. It's not your fault. If you hadn't, she would have just taken a cab."

He was right, Autumn would have found another way to the airport, but maybe she would have been late. So many fucking ifs, my head was spinning.

My gaze found my brother's.

"Alessio, why are the Ashford brothers helping?" I blurted out, unable to hold it back. Silence followed, but deep down I knew the answer.

He leaned back into his seat, tugging on his tie and loosening it. Our eyes held and I could see the answer in his eyes. The evidence stared me in the face, his features so similar to his brothers'.

"They are your brothers," I stated calmly but jealousy was an ugly green monster that gripped me and refused to let go. I felt like that ten year old girl watching two people I loved most in the world sneak out in the middle of the night, leaving me behind me.

“Half-brothers,” he corrected me, then reached across the table, taking my hand into his. “I should have told you before.”

“How?” I questioned him, scared to ask if we shared a mother or a father. It was stupid what my mind focused on when in anguish.

“Mother got pregnant by Senator Ashford. A corrupt politician, but he’s not as bad as our father.”

“Not as bad as my father, you mean,” I corrected him bitterly.

He squeezed my hand gently. “He made us, but he wasn’t a father. Not to you. Not to Mia. Not to me. He was a sperm donor. Just like Senator Ashford.”

I swallowed. If that was the case, why did I still feel like shit?

“But at least the sperm donor who created you isn’t a sadistic bastard,” I retorted as thick tension permeated the air. Part of me was jealous that he had a way to sever the connection with the man who made our lives hell. “I’m a Russo and that man’s blood runs through my veins.”

A look full of something vehement and dark entered his expression.

“He no longer matters,” my brother claimed. I wasn’t so sure. He left a mark on me, on my brother. He broke part of us. “He lost, we won. His legacy is dead. We live and every laugh from you and our family is another win against him.” When I didn’t respond, he let out a frustrated breath. “I should have taken you with me that night. Mia, you, and I should have left and never looked back.”

My throat tightened. “But we didn’t.” *You left me.*

It wasn’t fair to put it on him. My brain knew it. My heart knew it.

“I fucked up,” he rasped. “But this is our chance to move on. The last name of Russo ended with that fucker six feet under. Your last name will be Brennan. Fuck, I might just take Autumn’s last name if she’ll have me.”

“She’ll have you,” I told him confidently as a raw wave of warmth flickered in my chest.

“How long have you known, Alessio?” I asked him. “About the Ashfords.”

“For a while,” he admitted. “A few decades.”

“Jesus Christ,” I muttered. “And you never thought to tell me?”

“It didn’t really matter,” he reasoned. “As far as I was concerned, we didn’t have a father. It was just you, Mia, and me.”

“And now?”

His eyes lowered to Kol, then came up to me. “And now all I care about is *our* family. You, Autumn, Kol.”

“Daddy, color,” Kol urged and Alessio started coloring again. I watched them together with pride. Alessio never had a father to look up to, but he was a natural. Attentive. Protective. Loving.

He was always protective, more of a parent to Mia and me than our own parents.

“How do the Ashfords play into it?”

He raised his head, never ceasing his coloring. “They want to help.”

I waited, when he said nothing, I prompted, “And?”

“And maybe I could use Senator Ashford’s connections to get into Afghanistan.”

I shot up, straightening in my seat.

“What are you waiting for?” I blurted out. “Make this his payment for not being here for you when he should have,” I told him. “He *owes* you this.”

“Once we’re connected to him, the world will be watching us. Your wedding might become a circus.”

“So can yours,” I reminded him. I knew my brother and there was no chance in hell that he’d settle for anything less than a ring on Autumn’s finger. “Forget the circus and any repercussions of being connected to a senator. Just do what you need to do to get her back.”

Alessio nodded, a serious expression on his face.

“He has an event in D.C. in a few days, and I’ll go see him.”

“But-” I urged. I knew him enough to know there was more to it.

“I hate the idea of owing him or needing him,” he admitted. “But for her, I’d get down on my knees and beg. I don’t give a shit. As long as we bring her home.”

The volatile and vulnerable look in his eyes just about gutted me.

And suddenly, I feared what was in store for our family if Autumn didn’t make it back home.

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Chapter Twenty-Six

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SASHA

"Killian Brennan."

Tatiana dropped the name like it was nothing. Like she was discussing dinner plans.

My growl traveled through my home in New Orleans, chasing all the fucking ghosts, witches, any fucking thing out of the goddamn state. The fury burned like a motherfucker, ready to bring the entire French Quarter to ashes.

Killing Killian might cause a tiny war. Okay, maybe not tiny. Whatever. Nothing I couldn't handle.

Agitation rolled off my shoulders. It had been over a month since I last saw Branka in Montréal. I could still smell her scent, feel her soft skin under my palms, and hear her moans. All those fucking years and I could still taste her. I let out a sardonic breath, hating that fucking goddamn promise that kept me away from Branka.

Fuck!

I should kill Brennan for daring to look my woman's way, and then kill my brother for interfering in my fucking affairs.

But Branka wasn't ready for me seven years ago. Not even four years ago.

I'd been watching her for years, stalking her and biding my time. I waited for her to be ready. She was fucking ready. For me. For us. I knew more about her than I did about my own family and friends.

"So you gonna kill him?" Tatiana asked casually, sipping on her choice of poison and wearing sweatpants. Jesus Christ. She never wore sweatpants

and from the looks of it, they were men's Hanes sweatpants. My little sister was falling deeper and deeper into depression.

The girl who never even wore leggings found herself in sweatpants.

I kept tabs on her and there were no signs of her wanting to end it. She searched and searched for the culprits of Adrian's death. My brothers and I didn't exactly give up, but we kept running into roadblocks. Tatiana refused to let those roadblocks stop her.

Apparently she'd use a jackhammer to get through those. Maybe that was the reason for the sweatpants.

"Sestra, you can't keep this up," I told her, calling her sister in Russian. "You're killing your liver."

She waved her hand. "Livers can be repaired."

I shook my head. "So can your heart," I reasoned.

Her eyes came to me, a window to her pain staring back at me.

"Then why are you chasing the Russo girl?"

God, she could be annoying when drunk. But I hated seeing her unhappy.

"Tatiana, you have to let him go," I told her, ignoring her comment. "You have to find a way to move on. And searching for clues, drinking vodka," my eyes lowered to her pants, "-and wearing sweatpants is not the way to move on."

She tsked, clearly not convinced with my reasoning.

"Like you're looking for ways to move on from your obsession."

Touché, little sister. I'd be proud of her comeback if only it wasn't aimed at me. She set her empty glass down on the table next to her and stretched her long legs.

"What do you know about Branka and Killian's arrangement?" I asked instead.

"Only that they're getting married and Branka refused to walk down the aisle until her friend was back safe and sound." Tatiana snapped her fingers. "Of course, that's assuming her friend gets out of Afghanistan."

She'd get out of there. I'd make sure to help. For Branka. She loved her best friend, and Autumn, with her family, helped grow the damaged little girl into the woman she was meant to be. None of the therapists were able to do that.

Although, her friend was slightly reckless with her need to save the world. But Alessio's woman was neither here nor there. I had a bigger

problem on my hands.

How to kill Brennan and not start a damn war. *Maybe I could blame the Corsican mafia*. It was an entertaining notion. Except that Autumn might get caught in the crossfire. Okay, forget the French. Maybe the Greeks?

"You know, Killian Brennan is practically family," Tatiana remarked, as if she could read my thoughts. But she was right. Killing Killian might be a problem since my younger brother's wife, Aurora, was the sister to Liam Brennan's wife.

And he was Killian's father. Stepfather. What-the-fuck-ever.

And speaking of family, our early Christmas gathering was coming up in Portugal. Killian's sister and father would be there. Would it be awkward if I killed Killian before the party? Or maybe I should leave it for the week after?

Jesus fucking Christ, why was this world so goddamn small?

I could make it look like an accident. Nobody would ever be able to pin it on me.

Leave it as a last resort, my mind whispered.

Wynter Flemming, my little protégé, was fond of her cousin. Of all the damn people in this world, why in the fuck was Killian related to my sister-in-law and the kid I rescued? However, if the fucker didn't back off, I'd skin him alive. And he better not have touched Branka; otherwise a damn war would be the least of everyone's worry.

That was how deep I had fallen. I was here contemplating murder and starting a war. For Branka Russo, the woman that chose someone else.

No matter though. The little cat was jealous. It showed she was as deep into this as I was.

Either way, Branka wouldn't marry the Irish fucker.

As long as there was a single breath left in my body.

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Chapter Twenty-Seven

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SASHA

My brother's living room in Lisbon, Portugal, had views of the sea, family, and friends.

Sometimes the view of the sea was preferable. All my siblings were here, their families. The Kings. The Ashfords. And the Brennans. Except the fucker Killian Brennan wasn't here. His unhinged sister was here though.

Annoying as fucking shit.

Juliette Brennan spat shit out without thinking of any repercussions. And she antagonized everyone. I wished her father would marry her off so someone could fuck her into silence.

"I like Branka Russo," she purred. "I think she'll give Killian a run for his money." Wynter sat on the floor surrounded by children. My guess was she was tired of her cousin's mouth too.

Wynter was still struggling. Her heart was broken and she refused to talk. But she'd pull through. The DiLustros did a number on her, and they'd eventually pay for it. I'd see to it one way or another.

"I bet she doesn't exasperate him as much as you," Ivy, the fourth friend, commented. Silence followed and her eyes widened. It turned out the words slipped out of the red-haired girl. "I'm sorry. Not sure where that came from."

"Killian said Branka has a spine of steel." This spoiled brat had no idea. Branka was a survivor. Juliette's tragedies had nothing on Branka's. "I look forward to having another girl in our group."

God, I wanted to choke her so she'd stop talking. Not kill her, just have her pass out so peace would follow. Every single word about her brother was pushing me closer and closer to the edge.

And starting shit right before Christmas would be poor etiquette. Right?

"I can't decide whether you're glaring at Juliette or studying her," Aurora remarked, annoying the shit out of me. I loved my sister-in-law, and somehow her and my brother were perfect for each other. But she sure loved to poke at me.

"Neither," I told her coldly. "Girl is as annoying as a fly."

Aurora chuckled.

"She actually reminds me of you." I shot her an exasperated look. That girl and I couldn't be less alike if I tried. "You're not annoying as a fly. Unless you want to be. It's her stubbornness and determination. And of course, her big mouth."

I shook my head. "And you're an FBI profiler," I remarked dryly. "Get the fuck out."

"You antagonizing my wife?" Alexei showed up out of nowhere. No surprise there. He was a turbo stalker. I was a fucking angel compared to him. A dark angel, but an angel nonetheless.

"No, she's antagonizing me," I said, my tone bored. "And that girl over there. Couldn't Liam leave her at home once in a while?"

Aurora chuckled. "I think leaving her at home is what starts trouble. Those girls together are capable of destroying the city."

"Yeah, someone should marry them off and call it a day," I remarked dryly.

I took a sip of my cognac, flicking a glance Cassio's way. I wondered if he heard anything else from Alessio. The latter had been searching for ways to enter Afghanistan. Illegally since it was closed to the world.

"Why don't you marry?" Aurora's question had me forgetting Cassio and Alessio.

"Excuse me?"

"Why don't you marry?" she repeated.

"Not that it's any of your business, but I've waited for a very specific woman."

Aurora wasn't deterred by my tone. Anyone else would end the conversation. Not her. She wasn't the giving up type. After all, she searched for her brother for twenty years.

“So you found her?” she questioned.

“What makes you think I found her?” I asked her curiously, casually leaning against the mantel.

“You said you’ve waited for a specific woman. If you hadn’t found her, you’d say ‘you’re searching for a specific woman’. Am I wrong?”

Aurora was too smart for her own good. I didn’t bother answering her. She knew she was right.

“Is she ready now?” she demanded to know. God, family could be such a fucking pain. When I didn’t answer, she continued, “I heard you got into decorating.”

I shot a glare at Vasili. Him and his big mouth. Or was it his wife who ratted me out?

“Would you like me to redecorate your living room?” I drawled lazily. “I can get started now.”

She threw her head back and laughed so loud she woke up little Kostya. Everyone’s eyes shifted our way, curious to know what was so funny.

Alexei took five steps to the little playpen and lifted the boy up.

“What’s so funny over there?” Isabella, Vasili’s wife, demanded to know.

“Sasha offered to redecorate our living room today,” Alexei answered in his flat voice.

“Oh.” Isabella’s dark eyes met mine. “I don’t know if today’s a good day, Sasha.”

“Or ever!” Vasili chimed in. “Don’t quit your day job.”

Juliette’s phone pinged and she exclaimed, grinning from ear to ear. “Killian sends his regards. He and Branka are spending Christmas together, with the Corbins and Alessio.”

Cold fury shot through my spine, but I hid it. I smoothed a nonexistent wrinkle from my suit. “Christmas in New York is a sight to see.”

“Oh, they’re not in New York,” Juliette answered. “They’re freezing their balls in Canada.”

I’d be freezing my balls too then.

TRUE TO MY PLAN, it was Christmas Eve and I was freezing my balls in Montréal.

For fuck's sake.

At this rate, I'd be seeing Alessio's home more than my own. Maybe I should offer to buy him out. Although considering his woman was stuck in Afghanistan, it was probably not a good time.

I hoped she'd be home by now. For Branka's sake and her brother's. I still had some friends from my military days but getting into that country right now was a firm no-go.

Fuck!

I hoped the woman was still alive. She better be. I didn't want to see Branka's heart shattered.

From the nearby guest house's roof, I set up my equipment and watched for any movement through the scope. First, Branka's bedroom.

Thank fuck it was empty. Then the living room. Alessio's room. The kid's room. It was all empty.

"Did that little bratty minx–" Then it hit me. They were probably at the Corbin residence.

But I still hadn't moved. I sat, staring through the lens of my rifle and slowly a plan started formulating in my mind.

I had a debt to collect.

And my kotyonok had until her wedding to choose wisely.

If she didn't, I'd do it for her.

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Chapter Twenty-Eight

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SASHA

Screams tore through my dreams, waking me up.

I jolted out of my bed. My eyes darted left and right, disoriented. My breath clouded the air. Our home in Russia was always cold - no matter how many fireplaces were lit.

Nobody was here.

Maybe I dreamt it.

But still, I didn't move. Vasili said we had to be on alert. There were people who wanted us dead, and we always had to be prepared. I listened.

Crash.

Glass shattering on marble. It sounded like lots and lots of dishes crashing against the floor.

"I hate him." Mother's voice was hysterical.

I stood up and rushed to the door. Someone had to be attacking if Mother was screaming. I left my room and found my mama pacing up and down the hallway, her hair matted, her eyes wild and little Tatiana in her arms, screaming at the top of her lungs.

And all the while she kept muttering. "He doesn't love me. I'll never be enough. He doesn't love me. I'll never be enough."

I didn't understand her words nor who she was talking about.

"Mama," I called out.

Her pacing stopped and her wild eyes darted my way. She had blonde hair. Just like Vasili and I. Just like father. But her shade was different from ours.

“Sasha, get back to your room.” I remained in my spot. Her eyes shot my way, something unhinged in them. Hate. Disgust. Anger. No love. “You look at me with your father’s eyes. I can see him in you.”

I blinked, unsure whether that was good or bad. I didn’t like to anger Mother, but sometimes it happened whether I said anything or not. It happened more with me than Vasili. Maybe because there was a period when there was happiness when it was just the three of them.

Vasili said it had nothing to do with that, but I couldn’t understand what else it could be.

“Where’s Papa?” I demanded to know.

“You’re always going on about Papa. He doesn’t love you,” she snickered, shuffling the baby roughly between her hands. “He doesn’t love me. I don’t love you. Round and round we go.”

Something sharp pierced through my heart. I rubbed my chest. But I didn’t cry. I was a big boy now.

Mama roughly switched the baby into her other arm. My little heart feared. I knew babies were easy to hurt. I didn’t want my baby sister hurt. I wanted to protect her. Vasili and I would protect her - from everyone.

“Where’s Papa?” I repeated, ignoring the ache in my chest.

“He’s chasing his little whore and her bastard,” she hissed. I didn’t know what that meant, so I just stood there and stared at my mom. “No matter what I do or give him, he chases his whore.”

“Father is good,” I said, glaring at her.

Her lips curled in disgust. “You’re just like him. Worthless.”

My brows drew together. Father wasn’t worthless. He was busy taking care of many men under him. To ensure they all had food on the table and a roof over their heads. That’s what Vasili explained to me.

She shook her head. “You brought a curse to our family, Sasha. You weren’t enough. He found another woman because I was busy with your constant crying and whining.” She lowered her gaze to Tatiana. “Just like this baby. Always crying. Always whining.” Her eyes returned to me and the hate in them was like a punch in the gut. Without realizing, I took a step back as if she hit me. “You’re so unlovable. No woman will love you. Just like your father. Unlovable.”

“But you love him,” I pointed out in a small voice.

“Never enough,” Mama muttered as she started to pace again. “Never enough. He doesn’t love me. I’ll never be enough. You can’t make someone

be yours."

Mama kept going round and round, muttering to herself. And all the while Tatiana kept screaming her head off. She was turning red, and I feared her head would explode.

Suddenly, Mama stopped and lifted the baby as if she was readying to throw her through the air. My lungs squeezed. My head throbbed. My eyes stung.

"Mama!" I croaked, scared that anything would set her off into her rage. They have become more frequent lately.

With my baby sister still high above Mama's head, high-pitch screams filling the air, Mama's eyes lowered to me.

"Give me Tatiana," I rasped. "I'll feed her the bottle."

Mama's eyes met mine and held my gaze. I prayed she saw Vasili right now, not me. We were similar enough physically.

She hated me. She loved Vasili.

A heartbeat. Another one. Then she finally lowered her arms. I held my breath, pulse buzzing in my ears. I extended my hands slowly. She was only born a few weeks ago. I wasn't as good as Vasili at holding a newborn.

The moment Tatiana's warm little body, bundled up, came to me, I took her and held her close to my heart. She still cried, but it wasn't as high-pitched as mere seconds ago.

"I'll never be good enough," Mama muttered. I didn't understand anything she was saying. It didn't matter whether she said it in Russian or English. She rambled like a lunatic. "Just like you've never been enough."

Her eyes met mine, her face twisting with rage. I braced myself, sheltering the baby in my arms. She started walking, but instead of coming at me, she passed me. It was then I realized the direction.

The balcony.

I followed her, cold fear gripping my heart.

"Mama?" No answer. She opened the doors, the cold winter air instantly pushing the cold into our home. "Mama?" I tried again.

She glanced over her shoulder. The lost, crazed look in her eyes. "I'm going to jump, Sasha."

"No, Mama," I said in a small voice. "No, please."

She cackled, crazed, her hair flowing through the wind. Last year she had it colored brown, but when Papa didn't like it, she changed it back. The color wasn't the same as before. It was duller. Kind of like her eyes.

“Please, Mama. Stay,” I reached out with one hand, while still holding Tatiana with my other. “Stay for me. I’ll be good.”

”You’ll never be good enough. Not for me. Not for your father. Not for anyone. Nobody will stay for you. Better get used to it now, Sasha.”

She took a step forward and her body flew through the air, falling with a loud thud onto our courtyard.

Screams and shouting filled the air. My throat squeezed.

But the only thing I did was get the bottle and feed Tatiana.

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Chapter Twenty-Nine

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BRANKA

My brother’s wedding wasn't an elaborate affair but the love in the air was hard to miss.

There weren’t two people on this planet who deserved it more. Autumn getting stuck in Afghanistan had my brother just about losing his mind. But he never gave up. He rescued her, right along with help of his half-brother and Sasha. Of all the damn people, Sasha Nikolaev helped save my best friend. So me carving my initials into his heart was out of the question.

I sat with Killian as the bride and groom recited their vows, the soft breeze sweeping through the garden. The words were barely audible, as if Alessio and Autumn forgot about the world that surrounded them. It was just the two of them, making promises to each other. They’d keep them too.

I knew my best friend. I knew my brother even better.

Although I wished they would have gotten married closer to home. Kyoto in May was quite a sight to see. Japan in general was magnificent, but I still fought jetlag and fatigue. And then there was the issue of the pale blue eyes burning a hole in my back. I didn’t need to turn around to know who they belonged to.

Sasha Nikolaev.

I hoped the Nikolaev family wouldn’t be invited. She said a small wedding. There was nothing small about that family. And Autumn couldn’t forget that Sasha jumped in to help and get her out of Afghanistan. But that was neither here nor there. My brows furrowed. The only one not present from the Nikolaev family was the sister, Tatiana Nikolaev. I wondered why. It seemed unlikely they’d leave any of their siblings behind.

I sighed. It didn’t really concern me anyhow. I had enough of my own problems to solve.

My eyes flickered around us. Mountains surrounded us, the soft rush of the river hummed in the distance, and the scent of cherry blossoms fragranced the air.

Who the fuck knew Autumn and my brother were already sleeping together back then?

I watched my best friend beam at my big brother and my heart squeezed in my chest. He got his happily-ever-after. He deserved it more than anyone I had ever known. I didn’t think I had ever seen him so fucking happy and that made me happy.

Turning my head to Killian, I observed him. Would he ever watch me the way Alessio watched Autumn? That obsessive, possessive look that rattled you to your bones. I knew the answer somewhere deep in the pit of my stomach, but I couldn’t bring myself to admit it.

Inhaling deeply, I let the oxygen fill my lungs, then slowly exhaled.

Once I married Killian, the Russo family name would end. There would be nothing left of my father. Just dust and bones. In the graveyard of the old Russo manor.

I fucking hated that place. It wouldn’t hurt my feelings if it ended up reduced to ashes.

The vows were spoken. First kiss as husband and wife. The first dance was ongoing when I found my way to the secluded area by the buffet table, nibbling on a piece of crab. At least I hoped it was crab.

I watched the Ashfords, DiLustros, Nikolaevs, and my brother’s friends. If there was such a thing as an odd alliance, this was it.

There was one thing they all had in common though. Their desire to protect their family at all cost.

When it came to their families, they exercised brutality, corruption, and torture. My parents didn’t do that. My mother was too ruined and my father too cruel.

My eyes drifted through the crowd, and I couldn’t help sneaking in glances at Wynter Flemming. Well, Wynter DiLustro now.

Reluctantly, I had to admit she was beautiful. Her husband, Basilio DiLustro, couldn’t seem to keep his hands off her. It kind of reminded me of Nico Morrelli and his wife. Damn horny couples. Sasha stood with Basilio, the two discussing something pretty heatedly.

As if they could sense my eyes on them, both turned to look at me. I quickly whirled around, giving them my back. I just wanted to get through this wedding without any hiccups. Then I'd never have to see Sasha again.

"Are you okay?" Killian's voice came from behind.

Sucking deep breaths in through my nose then out through my mouth, I smoothed down my red mermaid dress with a deep V at the back. It molded perfectly against my skin, showing off my curves. Not that I cared to show them off. For the first time in forever, I wished for jeans and a few sizes too big sweatshirt. I wanted to hide, rather than be seen.

All because of a pale blue eyed devil.

Forcing a smile onto my lips, I shifted my body to face Killian. "Perfect," I lied.

His dark blue eyes, that sometimes almost appeared black, studied me but he said nothing.

My hand wrapped around my wrist, gripping it tightly. Pain throbbed in that wrist, it was broken so many times. But there was a reminder in that pain. That I was a survivor.

"Nice hair-do," Juliette, Killian's sister, complimented. "Will you wear it that way for your wedding?"

My hair was tied elegantly at my nape and my makeup was bolder than usual - red lipstick, heavy eyeliner, and so much mascara that my eyelashes felt heavy.

"Not sure," I answered her vaguely.

Truthfully, I had barely even started the wedding preparations. Autumn and her mother kept hinting at it and finally took matters into their own hands.

Juliette was… interesting. Unlike her brother who always seemed composed, Juliette was a ticking bomb. She had a temper.

"What are you not sure about?" Autumn's voice came from the side.

"Wedding hair," I told her.

"Ah." The look in her eyes said it all. I hadn't even picked a dress, never mind hair. "We have a little time to decide," she helped out.

No wonder I loved her. Now she'd be my sister.

"Congratulations," Juliette said. "It seems it's the season of weddings. Davina, then Wynter, now you, next Killian. I don't know if I can take much more of it."

I bit the inside of my cheek to stop from laughing out loud.

Wynter and Ivy joined us at that moment.

“You’ll take more of it and like it,” Ivy declared. “Stop being a wedding grinch.”

“I’m not a wedding grinch,” Juliette answered defensively. “Besides, you have to admit. It’s all a bunch of fuss for nothing.”

Wynter smiled. “It’s not for nothing. Two human beings pledge their love and devotion to each other for the rest of their lives.”

A strange sensation tightened my chest, but I ignored it.

“And when life is cut short?” Juliette questioned. “For either husband or wife. How do you move on?”

“Well, you continue with the knowledge that he or she would want you to move on and be happy.”

I frowned.

“I wouldn’t.” Everyone’s eyes shifted to me, watching me like I’d grown another head.

“What do you mean?” Ivy asked.

“I wouldn’t want him to move on,” I grumbled. “Fuck that shit. I’d demand he get in the fucking casket with me. Together forever, life or death.”

The silence grew deafening and thick tension permeated the air.

It was Juliette who broke the silence bursting into laughter. “I like that,” she cackled, holding her stomach. “Get in the fucking casket.” Tears trickled down her face, she was laughing so hard. “My brother is fucking doomed.”

Autumn rolled her eyes. “Somehow I think Juliette and Branka shouldn’t be left alone together.”

“Juliette alone with anyone is a dangerous thing,” Davina remarked as she joined the group just as Dante DiLustro headed our way.

Juliette’s spine stiffened. “Excuse me,” she muttered and disappeared as fast as her legs could carry her.

Wynter, Ivy, and Davina shared a look then went after her.

Autumn and I shared a look. “You think she’s avoiding him?” I asked dryly. Kind of like I was avoiding Sasha.

“I’d have never guessed,” she mused sarcastically.

My hand came to her lower belly. “How is my niece cooking?”

A choked laugh escaped her, but her eyes shone like stars against the night sky. “She’s cooking. She can’t wait to meet her aunt.”

I grinned. “Ditto. I’m going to spoil her rotten.”

Autumn groaned, but before she could protest, Kol ran from across the dance floor and threw himself into my arms.

“I’m going to be a pilot,” he announced.

I cocked my eyebrow amused. “Oh, I thought it was a painter yesterday?”

“Oh, I’ll be that too.”

“So why a pilot?” I asked him curiously.

Kol looked behind him and pointed a finger. I followed it to the opposite side of the dance floor where Sasha stood, his hands casually in the pockets of his suit. His expression was guarded, but his eyes burned with blue flames.

“Sasha said pilots can go anywhere in the world. A pilot drove daddy and him to the mountains where they saved Maman.”

I shook my head. Didn’t he know not to bring up that reminder to a child? Shooting him a glare, I turned around letting him burn a hole in my back.

“You can be anything you want, buddy,” I told my nephew. With a grin, he took off and I watched him hop to his father. Alessio scooped him up into the air and sat him on his shoulders, all the while Kol giggled happily.

God, it was so good to see my big brother happy. He wasn’t smiling or laughing, but it was in the way he watched his wife and his son. Every time he looked at Autumn, I feared for anyone who dared to get in between him and his family.

A look full of something volatile and raw lingered in my brother’s eyes and it reminded me of something. Or rather someone.

The realization was like a punch in the gut. It took my breath away.

I’d never have that with Killian.

My eyes drifted to my fiancé. He stood with Cassio and Alexei, the three of them talking. Cassio called out to Alessio and my brother joined them while his gaze sought out Autumn. The soft heat in his eyes could easily burn down the entire island with the intensity of their feelings.

“I feel like we need a hose to cool down this place,” I remarked, rolling my eyes pointedly.

Autumn chuckled softly, pulling her gaze away from the man of her dreams. Her hazel eyes came to me, watching me. Seeing too much.

“Are you okay?” Her fingers wrapped around my wrist softly, holding my gaze.

“Yes.” No.

My eyes unwillingly searched out Sasha who stood with Wynter and her husband. If looks could kill, she’d be dead. Was it wrong? Yes. Was I jealous? Obviously, not that I’d admit that to anyone. It would make marrying Killian a huge mistake.

A melodious laugh drifted through the air, along with the soft melody of some song repeating lyrics of “Killing Me Inside.” A wave of jealousy flared in my chest and I hated the feeling. I hated this clawing rage inside me demanding I go claw her face. It only showed my damn insecurities. Yes, my scars were gone but the insecurities were a part of me, ingrained in my flesh.

Both of Autumn’s hands came to my shoulders, and she turned me so we’d face each other.

“You’re not happy,” Autumn murmured softly. I smiled tightly, unwilling to comment on it. “I want to see you happy.”

“I’m happy.” *Enough.*

My eyes flickered to him. Killian was a good man. A super hot man. There’d be no risk of sitting at home, waiting for him, as he chased other women all around the globe. Sasha approached Killian, and I couldn’t help but glare at the latter. Why in the fuck did he have to come?

“How do you like his family?” Autumn questioned in a low voice. “His sister seems okay.”

I shrugged. “They’re not bad, but I like yours better.”

A soft smile pulled on her lips.

“We’re unique and you’re part of our family so it’s not mine, it’s our family.” Autumn always made me feel a part of her family. I loved them; I knew they loved me. But certain ghosts were hard to shake off. That eventually they’d realize how damaged I was. Would they still love me?

“Wynter seems nice,” Autumn remarked quietly. “Want me to kill her?”

My head snapped to my best friend. “I thought you said she seems nice.”

Autumn shrugged. “Well, she made my best friend unhappy so-”

A choked laugh escaped me. “Alessio is rubbing off on you. Where is my best friend who always wants world peace?”

A waiter with a tray passed us and she reached for the glass of cranberry juice. Alessio ensured there'd be plenty of it since it was the only thing Autumn could stomach for a while there.

She brought it to her lips, then paused. "I still want world peace," she remarked. "And your happiness."

"Maybe we just shave her bald," I murmured pettily. "All those golden curls could be used by someone else. She has her legs, what more does she need?"

Autumn and I shared a look and burst into a fit of giggles. We always threatened girls that if they pissed us off, we'd shave their heads.

"What's so funny?" A deep voice came from behind us. My heart stilled. Citrusy scent. Jesus, I couldn't stand how much just his cologne rattled me. I swallowed, determined to ignore all these wants that lurked deep in my heart. I was well on my way to recovery from a bad case of Sasha Nikolaev.

I still didn't look at him. I knew how easily it was for those pale blue eyes to grab hold of me and hang on tightly. Until I progressed in my recovery, I'd avoid looking at him.

"Nothing," Autumn finally answered. "How are you, Sasha?"

"Good." His eyes flicked to her belly. "Baby growing healthy?"

Autumn smiled softly, her hand rubbing her belly. "Yes. She's doing wonderful. She's strong like her auntie."

I could feel Sasha's eyes on me, and I had to fight a shudder. God, there should be Sasha Anonymous to help me recover from this addiction.

"She's strong," he confirmed. I peered at him from under my lashes, unable to resist. Arctic blue waters had nothing on Sasha's eyes. His gaze burned and sparks lit beneath my skin. "How about a dance, kotyonok?"

I forced a smile, but still didn't meet his gaze full on.

"No, thank you."

"It's just a dance."

Kol ran across the dance floor and grabbed my hand, laughing and saying something excitedly but I couldn't quite catch the words from the buzzing in my ears.

I lowered to my knees, ignoring the large shadow that watched me like he was ready to consume me into his own madness.

Sasha Nikolaev would pull me into his psychotic darkness and then let me drown if I didn't keep my guard up. He already brought parts of me up

that I didn’t know existed.

“What was that, buddy?” I asked my nephew.

“Daddy said dance with you,” Kol murmured, then leaned closer, and whispered in my ear. “He said save you.”

My eyes traveled over the space to find Alessio’s dark gaze on the shadow looming over me. Hmmm, maybe Sasha and Alessio had a falling out. Although, I’d think it’d been resolved since Sasha helped with Autumn’s rescue.

“I’d love to dance with you.”

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Chapter Thirty

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SASHA

I watched her saunter to the dance floor, her nephew's little hand in hers.

The moment they stepped onto the floor, a rap song started and I watched with dry amusement as the little guy broke into some impressive dance moves.

Branka threw her head back and laughed, dancing along with him. Her body moved sensually and with grace, as she lip synced the words. Everyone watched them, even other couples that danced stopped to watch them.

"They often dance together," Autumn remarked next to me, watching them with wet eyes. "It's their song."

I finally recognized the song. Halsey and G-Eazy or some shit like that.

Fuck their song. My kotyonok and I didn't have a song and I'd known her longer than that cute little prick. Jesus, this shit was getting out of hand.

My eyes drifted to Killian who watched her dancing. He liked her. But he didn't love her. Not like me. Killing him would be problematic, so I started to slowly formulate another plan.

This obsession had festered into something and there was no coming back from it. Not that I wanted to be cured of it. Maybe that was the difference between others and me. They needed a recovery, I didn't. I just needed her.

I wanted her to need only me. To live and breathe just for me.

A bit overboard? Maybe. I didn't give a shit. Everyone else could go fuck themselves. I waited seven goddamn years. She was mine and nobody

else's.

"Autumn, I'm ready to collect."

Slowly, the bride shifted so she could face me. Her hazel eyes met mine. She understood what I meant, but hesitancy lingered in her expression.

She swallowed. "Collect what?" she asked.

"You owe me," I told her calmly. "I'm ready for the payment."

She flicked a concerned glance to Branka then returned it to me.

"Me and my big mouth," she muttered. My lips tugged up. She returned her attention to me. "What do you want, Sasha?" Then before I answered she continued, "And before you go too far, I want to make one thing understood. If you hurt her, I'll help her kill you."

Yeah, I liked her, despite her crazy and impossible notion about saving the world.

"That's a fair warning."

My eyes darted to the dance floor to find Branka dancing with that unhinged Juliette, Killian, and Kol and my jaw clenched.

I shoved my hands into my pockets or risked pulling out my gun and ending the fucker. Killian, not little Kol. The latter could live, as long as he kept his hands to himself.

Jesus, I knew it'd get to this from the first kiss. I wasn't sure whether staying away from her turned all this into a crazy obsession. Or maybe it was destined to become one all along.

Ever since that bar incident, all I could focus on was her. Branka Russo. My own temptation. A girl I wanted to worship. The woman whose full submission I craved. The image of her, on her knees, watching me with those silver eyes as I'd thrust into her mouth, played in my mind. Or her naked on my bed, ass up, head-down, as I fucked her into oblivion where only I existed for her.

Goddamn it, that was not what I needed right now.

Heat rushed to my groin. With a clench of my teeth, I pushed the images out of my mind. Or risked losing my shit and stealing the bride's best friend today. Though reluctantly I had to admit, it wasn't a bad idea. I had been patient. After all, it was how I hunted my targets. Sometimes it took a day. Other times it took months. Although, my relentless tracking of Branka was my longest running pursuit.

Bitter amusement filled me.

It turned out I was more like my psychotic mother than my father. I couldn't let go. She was my vice. My addiction. My obsession.

And I barely had a taste of her. Jesus!

"When and where is the wedding?" I gritted.

Just saying those words rubbed me the wrong way.

"Jesus, Sasha," Autumn murmured, flicking a worried gaze around. "Please tell me you won't do something stupid."

"I won't do something stupid." In fact, it would be the best thing I had ever done. "You owe me," I reminded her, just to make sure she understood I wasn't fucking around. "Both you and Alessio."

Her eyes darted to Branka, watching her pensively. Then her shoulders squared and her eyes glinted with steely knowledge.

"I love Branka," she said. "If there's anyone who deserves happiness, it's her. Did you or did you not cheat on her?"

"I kept my promise," I gritted, pissed off she would question me. "Did she?"

She narrowed her eyes on me.

"Don't be a macho dick," she reprimanded me. "That's for her to answer." A troubled expression crossed her face. "She says she's happy, but those are just words. On the outside, she's fine. But on the inside, she's not. She needs–" She paused as if she was unsure how much she could tell me. "She needs more. More than what she's settling for. If you can give her more, then I'll be on your side. If you cannot, let her go." She glared at me and I couldn't distinguish whether she wanted me to let Branka go or not. "Be the stand-up guy in this whole charade."

Who in the fuck ever said I was a stand-up guy? Crazy, yeah. But all that was beside the point. Letting Branka go wasn't an option. She was mine, before she was anyone else's.

"Date and place of the wedding," I said darkly.

She let out a heavy sigh.

"Why can I already sense a clusterfuck on the horizon?"

My lips tugged. Smart woman. Two minutes later I had a date, time, and place for the wedding.

I straightened my jacket and began to leave. But before I left this joyous occasion, I stalked towards Branka who stood alone by the bar.

She must have let her hair down because it trailed down her back, wavy and unruly, just like her.

Her shoulders stiffened and I knew she could feel me behind her. She didn’t bother looking over her shoulder. The little minx was adamant about avoiding looking my way.

The most perfect woman and she couldn’t even stand to look at me. Our relationship was bound to improve once I kidnapped her though.

She smiled at the bartender. The fucker got all flustered and blushed. He fucking blushed, but before he could return her smile, he caught my glare.

“Unless you have a death wish, get lost,” I growled, shooting him a touch-her-and-I’ll-kill-you stare. He paled, then scurried away leaving the bar unattended.

“Last chance, kotyonok, to keep your promise,” I purred. “Or all hell will break loose before you can say ‘I do’ to the wrong man.”

It was the only warning she’d get.

I’d be damned if I let another man own that body. I touched her. I made her moan and scream my name. Nobody would touch that little body but me.

She met my gaze in the glass behind the bar and her eyes flashed. Like lightning against the gray sky.

Then she lifted a finger and flipped me off.

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Chapter Thirty-One

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BRANKA

I leaned in the doorway of the nursery that my niece would soon occupy. Alessio handmade a cradle that sat next to his and Autumn's bed in the master bedroom. To keep her closer during the first month.

Autumn's father insisted he was best suited to put together the crib pieces that my brother hand built for his little princess.

"Are you reading directions, darling?" Mrs. Corbin asked her husband in an exasperated tone that made me smile. "Otherwise, we'll be at this for a week."

"Alessio made the parts for it. The directions are right there," Autumn's father retorted, pointing at my brother with one of the pieces he was trying to put together.

"Why couldn't we have had a normal crib?" Mrs. Corbin wondered. "You two together and the wood projects will drive us crazy. Maybe I could cook us dinner?"

We all straightened up at the same time and answered, "No."

The message was loud and clear. No homemade cooking by Mrs. Corbin. Autumn's mother was amazing, but she couldn't cook to save her life. She was much better at killing than cooking.

She waved her hand, exasperated. "One little mistake and you're judged for life."

"Darling, there was more than one. Or two. Or three. Think of Branka's upcoming wedding. We can't afford to be sick."

I shrugged my shoulders. Puking my guts out might be a good reason to postpone the wedding. Or at least the wedding night.

“I've ordered dinner,” Alessio told his mother-in-law while a smile tugged at his lips.

“Thank God,” Mr. Corbin grumbled and earned himself a scowl from his wife.

Alessio leaned against the windowsill, wearing jeans and a black t-shirt while Autumn sat on the floor with Kol, rubbing his mother’s belly and waiting for movement by his little sister. I could already tell he’d be a protective big brother and my poor niece wouldn’t be able to properly date.

My lips curled into a smile. I was looking forward to seeing them grow up. Happy, safe, and protected. Something Alessio and I never had.

Alessio’s home became a revolving door of grandparents, children’s laughter, family, and friends coming in and out of my brother’s manor. I was happy for him and Autumn, they both deserved all the happiness life could give them.

Ever since Alessio got Autumn back, it was like watching a fairy tale unfold in front of my eyes. It offered hope.

My phone beeped and I retrieved it from my pocket. It was a message from Killian. ***Anything you want from Ireland?***

I smiled. After Autumn’s wedding in Japan, he left for Ireland and I came back to the States. He offered to take me along with him, but I used the excuse of wedding preparations and staying with Kol while Autumn and Alessio were on their honeymoon. So I came back to Montréal.

It was wrong. I should try and spend as much time with him rather than avoid him as much as possible. He had been nothing but thoughtful. But I feared the more time I spent with him, the sooner a physical part of our relationship would commence.

He’d kissed me. It didn’t put me off kissing him, but it didn’t exactly do to me what Sasha’s kisses did. And I hated that I compared it to Satan's spawn who’d seduced me.

Strong Irish Whiskey. I pressed send, smiling. I wondered if he’d actually buy it.

“Mom, here stay with Kol.” Autumn patted a spot next to her. “You can boss dad and Alessio with the crib. I want to go through a few last minute things with Branka for her wedding.”

My wedding.

It was fast approaching. I should be over the moon about it. I wasn't.

Truthfully, I never remembered myself dreaming about getting married. Having someone crazy about me, yes. Having amazing sex, yes. But marriage never particularly appealed to me.

But Killian was a good man. Much better man than my father ever was. Or Alessio's biological father for that matter.

Yet, I still held some reservations about the whole marriage. Not because of Killian. The guy was incredible.

"Ready?" Autumn's hand took mine and tugged me along.

Her long Maxi dress did nothing to hide her baby bump. Not that she was trying to hide it. She only had a trimester to go and she glowed. Not only because she was pregnant but because she was so happy. Those months when she was stranded in Afghanistan changed her. She still believed in saving the world and people in it, but she also refused to waste a single minute on bullshit.

We made our way through the manor, but instead of staying inside, she dragged me to the back of the house where the large pool lay.

"Is now the right time for a swim?" I mused. "While they're slaving over the crib."

Autumn lowered herself onto one lounge chair and I followed suit, stretching my legs. The sun warmed my skin and I turned to look at my best friend, shielding my eyes from the sun.

"Spit it out, Autumn."

It has been three weeks since her wedding. Since I last saw Sasha. I tried not to think of him. Now he wanted me. It wasn't good enough. I wanted to be his first choice. The only choice. Not his last choice. Did he just expect me to jump and be grateful for his attention?

Anyhow, it didn't matter. He broke a promise and I had moved on.

I made a promise to Killian. We'd get married. Next week. I winced, wishing there was more time, but then quickly scolded myself.

Autumn watched me worriedly. She had been doing that ever since the wedding, throwing me sidelong glances and questioning me about whether I was happy or not. I was grateful for her but I wished she'd stop asking about whether I was fine.

I feared one of these times, I'd lose my composure.

"Are you sure marrying Killian is the right choice?" she questioned me.

"Yes."

Truthfully, I didn’t fucking know. I felt like I was drowning but I didn’t understand why. My brain knew not all marriages weren’t like my parents’, but my heart played games.

“Maybe we can postpone the wedding and wait,” she suggested.

“Autumn,” I groaned, exasperated. “I just want to rip off the band aid and be done with it.”

She stared at me with concern scrawled all over her face. “Getting married shouldn’t be like ripping off a band aid.”

I let out a sigh. “Okay, wrong comparison,” I murmured. “I just can’t wait to be married.”

“Liar.” She knew me too well. “Sasha keeps bugging me about you.”

Out of nowhere, fury blasted through me.

“He has no right to bug you.” Anger and indignation rushed through my veins. “He broke his promise. The last thing I need is someone who can’t even keep his promises.”

“Are you sure he broke his promise?” she asked softly. Her warm gaze caused a knot of emotion to form in my throat, the lump growing bigger and bigger, until it threatened to suffocate me. “Did you ask him?”

“I did.” She waited. “He didn’t confirm nor deny, but that’s enough admission for me.”

I tilted my head up to the sun, watching the clear blue sky that reminded me of certain pale blue eyes.

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Chapter Thirty-Two

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SASHA/ BRANKA

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SASHA

"You owe me a favor," I reminded him. "And to Mia."

Jason, an old military buddy, stared back at me with an annoyed expression on his face.

He'd had the hots for Mia. We both served in the same regiment with her. But he failed her. He was supposed to keep an eye on her when I was on short assignments. That day he failed, big time. He didn't help her. Unlike the others, I spared his life. With a caveat.

That he'd owe me a favor. No questions asked. He agreed - reluctantly.

Although, just as he predicted, I came to collect at the most inconvenient time. As he readied to be deployed. But he could take a little detour.

"Why can't you go yourself?"

Thick silence crept through the room. He knew what he owed me, what he owed to Mia. Those men who attacked Mia had done it to another woman before her. If he'd reported them, they wouldn't have done it to Mia. She might have still been alive.

"Because you owe me," I said in a cold tone. "And I came all the way to Timbuktu to collect."

He knew those assholes had their sights set on Mia. He kept watching, but not well enough. They got to her and now she was dead.

I killed the men who touched her. The only reason I spared Jason was because Mia liked him, and he hadn't touched her.

My eyes traveled over the property. The guy did okay for himself. Ten acres of land. Horses. Single level ranch home with a wraparound porch. Cozy. Cute. Boring.

"Nice place you've got here."

He narrowed his eyes on me. "Are you insinuating something?"

I cocked my eyebrows, pinning him with an innocent look. "Was I insinuating something?"

He sighed and I knew he was about to cave in.

“What the fuck do you want me to do with her?”

Handing him the envelope, I grinned. “I want you to hand deliver this to her.”

“Are you for fucking real?” he groaned. “The debt repayment is me being your delivery boy.”

“You should thank me on your knees,” I said, my voice unnaturally calm. “I could have demanded you kill someone for me.”

He snatched the envelope and headed towards his cozy little ranch home.

Two more attempts to get her to come to her senses before the wedding.

My little kotyonok would learn that I’d never let her go.

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BRANKA

One week until the wedding.

The countdown was a loud ticking in my head. Tick. Tock.

I was alone in the manor. Again. Alessio, Kol, and Autumn stayed at the penthouse, after visiting Autumn's parents. Oddly enough, I opted to stay home. Alone.

Alessio's odd look didn't escape me. Usually I disliked being by myself. I hated being alone, but the truth was that since Father had been buried six feet under, I didn't fear it. But that dull ache in my chest and longing still lingered.

Roaming from room to room, as if saying goodbye, my fingers lightly swept over the furniture. I still remembered those first few weeks when I moved here. Alessio saved me, just as I knew he would. Although sometimes I wondered if he hadn't come back too late.

My father's cruelty had already ruined me. Tainted me.

It had to be the reason I felt things with Sasha that I never felt with anyone else. Maybe I was never meant to be everything to someone. Killian would never look at me the way Alessio looked at Autumn. But he'd also never treat me like my father treated our mother.

The floorboards creaked behind me and I whirled around, coming face to face with a man.

There was a sophisticated aura about him. A designer shirt and trousers. Tall. Broad shoulders. Sharp features. Mid-thirties. Military cut.

"Who are you?" I demanded to know.

Our gazes locked, while my brain worked on evaluating my options. Alessio usually kept a gun in his desk but it wasn't close enough to reach it. The knife, on the other hand, I'd be able to get to.

"A guy paying a debt," he grumbled, rolling his eyes.

Alessio's guard finally showed up, and I couldn't help rolling my eyes. He was late. If this guy had come to kill me, I'd be dead already.

"Can you explain what you mean about the debt?" I demanded.

He remained quiet for a while, studying me. "You look a lot like your sister."

My heartbeat paused for a second before it resumed its fast paced thundering. “You knew Mia?”

He nodded. “We were friends.”

“Friends?”

“Yes.”

My gaze flickered to the guard.

“It’s okay,” I told him, dismissing him. “I can handle him.”

I waited until he was gone, before I turned my attention back to the guest.

“What are you doing here?” I demanded to know.

“Paying back a favor to a mutual friend,” he answered.

I scoffed. “I doubt we have any mutual friends.”

Amusement passed his expression. “This friend is a major pain in my ass.”

My brows furrowed. “What friend?”

“Sasha Nikolaev.”

I shook my head in disbelief. “Get the fuck out,” I muttered, although I agreed with the sentiment. Sasha was a major pain in my ass. “How do you know him?”

“Believe it or not, we served together.”

“In the military?” Sasha Nikolaev was full of surprises.

“Yes.” He took a step closer and handed me an envelope. “He wanted me to give you this.”

Hesitantly, I took it, then opened the note. It was short and not sweet. *Remember your promise, kotyonok. And I’ll let him live.*

“Okay, I’ve done my thing,” he announced. “I’m out of here. I should be over in the Middle East right about now. Not in Canada.”

He sauntered towards the door, when an idea struck me.

“Hey, can I ask you a favor?”

He turned around, watching me with a guarded expression. “What kind of favor?”

This time I grinned mischievously. “The kind that will make Sasha Nikolaev think I killed you.”

It was the next best thing to carving my initials into Sasha’s heart.

A choked laugh escaped him. “Pull one over on Sasha,” he cackled. “I’m all in. Tell me what you have in mind?”

I rubbed my hands together. “Go silent on him.” It was hard to hide my smugness. “And I’m going to buy a heart and ship it to Satan’s spawn with a little note.”

I should have known the psychotic mobster would have taken the threat the wrong way.

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Chapter Thirty-Three

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BRANKA

"Remember our last outing to The Eastside Club?" Juliette snickered. Autumn and I stood by the bar, waiting for our drinks. Basilio DiLustro owned The Eastside, although from what I understood Liam Brennan owned it last year.

"You think Bas barricaded the safe?" Davina mused teasingly.

A round of snorts came from Wynter, Davina, Ivy, and Juliette. They were younger than Autumn and me, as well as the other women who'd come to my bachelorette party.

"He said they don't keep cash there anymore," Wynter remarked.

Autumn and I shared a confused look. The four girls snickered and Davina, Liam's very young wife, must have caught our confusion.

"We stole from the safe here a year ago," she clarified.

"Oh."

"Yeah, the three of us shook our asses on the bar," Juliette remarked dryly. "As a distraction, while Davina was getting caught in there. Her and my dad were probably doing the hanky panky. Some sexual freak show."

Autumn promptly spit her non-alcoholic beverage all over me while the girls rolled their eyes. I groaned, then grabbed napkins off the bar and wiped my sparkly short dress.

"Don't pay attention to Jules," Wynter remarked. "She's still bitter that Davina didn't reveal we sucked as robbers right away." She slid a glance her way. "And most of all, she's pissed off she got on Dante's radar."

"Dante can go fuck himself," Juliette snapped.

“I’m pretty sure he’d much rather fuck you,” Ivy chimed in, her tone dry as gin. “You’re just making the chase thrilling for him.”

“Maybe she loves to be chased.” Wynter chuckled, studying her cousin with a knowing look. “Jules’ dirty talk to poor Dante backfired. Turns out, Dante’s filthy mouth and imagination is worse than hers.”

“Those two will never babysit my children,” Davina added, barely keeping her face straight. “Otherwise, I’ll have horny teenagers on my hands.”

Juliette glared at them, while the others laughed so hard, they thought they’d pee themselves. Ivy actually excused herself and ran to the bathroom.

Autumn and I smiled, entertained. Wynter and her friends were quite entertaining. Slightly reckless from what little I heard. But I could see the appeal. I still wanted to scratch Wynter’s pretty face, but reluctantly I had to admit, I wouldn’t be all into it. So she’d heal.

“So do you like Dante?” I questioned Juliette. “Will he be my brother-in-law?”

“Fuck no,” she growled. “There is nothing about him I like.”

The expression on her friends’ faces told me otherwise, but I didn’t question her. We’re all allowed some secrets.

“Why did you key his car and smash the windows?” Davina asked. “You only enticed him more.”

Juliette’s expression darkened. “Because the fucker kissed me.” Utter silence followed, and she added, “In a supply closet.”

Davina and Wynter burst into laughter. Wynter’s golden curls bounced, cascading over her shoulders. She looked pretty, in a short golden dress. The girl attracted glances from everywhere but she was oblivious to it. The only one she seemed to have eyes for was her dark, brooding husband, Basilio DiLustro.

Killian hinted that Basilio kidnapped Wynter and forced the marriage issue only four months ago or so. She didn’t seem terribly upset over it.

“Where would you have preferred he kissed you?” Davina asked, her voice full of humor.

“Not in a supply closet.”

“So you liked the kiss?”

“No,” she gritted. Even in the darkened bar, I could see Juliette’s deep blush. Poor girl.

“I would have slashed his tires,” I chimed in to help her. “Or maybe his dick.”

Juliette smiled, then snatched a bottle from the bar. “My sister-in-law knows what I’m talking about.” She poured two glasses and handed me one. “Bottoms up, sis.”

The two of us downed our drinks and I promptly coughed. “What the hell is this?”

“Irish whiskey.” Juliette clinked our glasses. “You can’t savor it. You just down it like you’re parched.”

And I did. That glass and the next.

“Take it easy, Branka,” Autumn warned. “Your wedding is tomorrow.”

The lights dimmed and suddenly the whole bar shook. I jumped backwards and found four half-dressed male dancers on the bar.

Suddenly the entire bar was riled up. All the women, some I knew, others I didn’t, stared at the men on the make-shift bar stage.

Juliette grabbed the other bottle of whiskey before it got smashed. “Can’t waste expensive booze,” she explained.

I didn’t want to burst her bubble, but I was pretty sure that was cheap booze.

Juliette Brennan. Killian’s sister. She was a bit on the wild side. Okay, a lot on the wild side. And she was best friends with Wynter Flemming. Oh, and they were cousins. How perfect!

God, this fucking world was too goddamn small.

Leaving Juliette to her booze, Autumn and I found a spot. Her eyes weren’t on the bar. She was never really interested in other men. Truthfully, the men didn’t appeal to me either, but I kept my fake smile on while my eyes hazed from the booze remained glued on the stage.

That Irish whiskey was stronger than anything I had drunk before, seeping through my bloodstream and slowly lightening the heavy feeling in my heart. My eyes roamed over Grace, Luciano’s wife, as well as Áine, Cassio’s wife. Mrs. Corbin was here too, although I couldn’t distinguish whether her expression was appalled or amused. Her eyes were definitely zoomed in on the male dancers.

I downed my glass of the bitter liquid. The liquor burned in my throat and my chest. One of the performers approached me with a crown, while dancing, his junk too close to my face, and sat the crown on my head.

“Bride-to-be,” he announced like nobody else in this bar knew it was me getting married. They came to *my* bachelorette party. But still I smiled.

“How perceptive,” I mused, grabbing my drink and downing it. All this was too much. I didn’t like it. Tomorrow was coming too fast.

“You’re beautiful,” he complimented, while never breaking the dance. Was he giving me a lap dance? I didn’t want it. “Your man is a lucky guy.”

His hand came to my hair. I shook it off. He thought it was me playing and reached out again as I scooted backwards, needing all the space I could get from this Chippendale. Why did people think those were so great? I didn’t particularly care for someone shaking their booty in my face.

My gaze pulled to the side by some invisible force and I froze. Piercing pale blue eyes glowed in the dark. My heart fluttered, then stopped beating all together. No, it couldn’t be. I closed my eyes, took a deep breath, then opened them.

They were gone.

Jesus, now I was imagining things.

I shook my head and stood up, then announced, “Restroom time.”

Autumn chuckled. “I’ll go with you,” she offered.

My palm came up in the air, facing her. “No, no. I can do it,” I declared, my body swaying a bit. Turning on my heel, I headed in the direction of the bathroom. To my surprise, the guy followed me.

“What are you doing?” I questioned him.

“My job is to make you happy tonight,” he deadpanned.

I rolled my eyes. He was dedicated, I’d give him that. “I’m happy,” I told him. “Now go back to the other women so I can use the restroom in peace.”

Under the lights of the hallway that led to the bathroom, I could see dark shadows under his eyes. He was built strong, bulky but it was all off. I couldn’t quite figure out what I didn’t like about him.

His hand came to my hip and I pushed against him, cringing that I had to touch his bare chest. I’d have to bleach my hands now. Ugh.

“I really like my personal space,” I told him, my speech slightly distorted.

“I’ll fill your space.” Yuck. So gross. My grimace must have conveyed the message. “What? Already faithful to your husband?”

My gaze caught on someone walking down the hall. MMA build. Broad shoulders. Dark suit. He looked up, his eyes colder than a Siberian winter.

My heart jumped into turbo mode and adrenaline rushed through my veins.

Pale blue eyes. My imagination wasn't playing tricks on me.

My mouth opened, but before I had a chance to say a word, he snapped the neck of the Chippendale.

A loud thud. His body lay on the floor, his eyes still open and staring at me. In my drunken haze, I lifted my head to find Sasha's cold, angry gaze on me.

He clicked his tongue.

"My little kotyonok, what did I say about other men touching you?" he tsked.

"You don't scare me," I breathed.

A sardonic breath left him.

A shiver rolled through me as he stepped over the dead body. He pressed his lips against my ear, his big, strong body brushing against me.

"That's your first mistake, kotyonok." His hands took my wrists and shackled them above my head as he stared at me. Every fiber of my being was aware of his muscles pressing against me, my breasts pushing against his chest with every inhale and exhale. My whole body tingled.

My heart pounded in my ears. I couldn't get enough air into my lungs. I didn't think alcohol nor the dead body laying barely a foot from us had anything to do with it.

"Cancel the wedding." His voice was black velvet, a dark threat suffocating me.

"No."

His gaze was so cold, it froze the alcohol swimming in my veins. That was all I needed to sober up. Sasha.

"Cancel. The. Wedding."

"No." Stubbornness made people stupid. "I don't want you." Liar. My stupid body wanted him, but he was all wrong for me. He lied to me. He didn't wait for me. *He didn't choose me first.*

He lightly grasped my throat and a tremor rolled through me. Hot. Exhilarating. His mouth moved against mine.

"He will never have you." The conviction in his voice should have been my warning. Instead butterflies fluttered through my veins at his words. My only excuse was that alcohol still lingered in my cells.

"I claimed you," –his voice was a dark rasp, full of promises, "and I'm going to keep you."

Someone called my name, but there was nobody in our vicinity.

Without warning, Sasha took a step back, and turned away from me, heading towards the exit sign.

“Get some sleep tonight, Branka. You’re gonna need it.”

He didn’t even look back as he said those words.

“OH MY GOSH,” Juliette exclaimed, her eyes darting between me and the body just a few feet away from me.

“What the fuck happened here?” Basilio DiLustro muttered. Right behind him were Wynter, Ivy, Davina, and Autumn.

“He’s dead,” I said, my voice strangely calm. “He just collapsed.”

Autumn’s eyes bore into me but I avoided looking at her.

“Jesus,” Basilio muttered. “Did he collapse before or after his neck was snapped?”

Oh, shit.

My eyes lowered to the body. How in the hell could he tell his neck was snapped? Maybe the weird angle of the neck. *Christ.* Sasha shouldn’t have killed him.

Everyone’s eyes drilled into me, burning a hole into my skull. Masking my expression, I inhaled, then raised my head to meet everyone’s face.

“I didn’t realize his neck was snapped.” I acted innocent, blinking my eyes at them, feigning confusion.

Autumn and Basilio eyed me suspiciously but neither one of them said a thing.

A blond guy joined us, whistling and giving the dead body a kick. “This one’s dead.”

“Priest, don’t kick the body,” Wynter scolded him softly. “It’s disrespectful.”

“Sorry, Sis.”

I sighed, done with this bachelorette party.

“I think it’s time we call it a night,” I told everyone, my eyes on Autumn. “I need my beauty sleep, you know.”

Maybe I’d convince Autumn that we could have our Friday movie night.

One last time.

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Chapter Thirty-Four

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SASHA

"They let any scum own a penthouse in New York City these days," I remarked dryly as I walked through the threshold of the Konstantin penthouse. It was hard to guess which twin it belonged to, not that I fucking cared.

Maxim stood in front of the panorama windows, his back turned to me and his eyes focused on the skyline as he drank from a tumbler. There were no soft colors in this place. It was decorated with functionality in mind, gray, white, and black colors throughout the penthouse.

Maxim turned around slowly, sipping from his tumbler that probably housed something even stronger than vodka.

He'd gone downhill since that whole fiasco seven years ago.

"You better not be shitfaced tomorrow," I growled.

Unfortunately, I had to cash in on the debt. The Konstantin brothers were the only ones that had no connection to Cassio's gang nor the Brennans. And nobody knew about this debt but the three of us.

It'd be hard for anyone to connect the dots.

"Don't worry," Maxim replied, his voice clear. Apparently, he could hold his liquor. "You'll get your woman. I'll wait in front of that church, hoping you get caught. Let's just pray that you don't set that old establishment on fire by stepping foot into it."

Fuck, I wished there was somebody else to use tomorrow. I wished even more that Branka would end this charade and call off the wedding.

"Did Ilias line up a plane?"

I'd ensure everything was in place with the Konstantins and then get some sleep. If that was possible while sleeping under the Konstantin's roof. Staying in the hotel or my penthouse was out of the question. Nobody knew I was in New York City and nobody would until I snatched the bride.

Well, nobody except for the bride herself. But I knew she'd keep our little encounter between us.

"He did," he confirmed. "Where in Russia are you going to stay?"

I eyed him coldly. He was being awfully nosy. "What are you? A fucking Nosey Nellie?"

He shrugged. "Just making conversation."

"Don't," I said. "Besides, I thought you can dig up anything on anyone," I remarked sarcastically. Although, I knew anything connected to Pakhan was off limits to him. Including his brother's travel itinerary. Not even Nico could hack into Illias' itinerary.

"Using Ilias' or your place?" he questioned. "Probably yours since you have your own family home in Russia." He was being an annoying bastard and my finger itched to just shoot him right now. End his miserable life. "Unless you're worried that'll be the first place they'll look for you."

"That is none of your business," I growled, my tone dark and I observed him tense. Maxim might be smart but he was a chicken shit.

"I can drive you wherever you're going," Maxim offered. "Not sure why you need a motorcycle."

"Just do what I say," I snapped. "Once tomorrow is over, your debt will be paid."

The day couldn't come soon enough.

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Chapter Thirty-Five

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BRANKA

The summer sun shone through the high windows of the St. Patrick's Cathedral's bridal suite.

Truthfully, it was a rectory, but the bridal suite sounded so much better. Dust particles traveled through the air, and I swore even that was giving me a headache.

Saturday weddings.

Autumn's mother insisted Saturday weddings had better attendance. Not that I cared as long as my brother and Autumn, along with her parents were there.

By now, I regretted not planning my own wedding. It was too big. Too many people I didn't know nor care about.

Senator Ashford was in attendance, bringing with him reporters and tons of news coverage. Not even sure how or why he got on the list. And why in the hell would he want to attend my wedding? Sure he's my brother's father, but he was never part of Alessio's life.

It was stuffy in here. The sun pouring through the windows made it too hot.

I resisted the urge to rip my wedding dress off my body so I could breathe. I pressed a hand to my stomach, a bitter taste on my tongue. Last night's alcohol swirled in my belly, making me nauseous. I wished I had followed my best friend's advice and drunk only water and soda.

Yes, sad.

The bachelorette party was a hoot. Or not. One dead body wasn't so bad. Right?

Glancing around, I ensured pale blue eyes were nowhere in the room. I was on pins and needles. I just wanted this over with and behind me. Then it'd be final and there'd be no chance of temptation in the form of the wrong guy.

Bile rose in my throat and I hunched over, covering my mouth. Nothing came up but a cold sweat broke out on my skin. I blamed it on the alcohol rather than Satan's spawn.

Once Autumn and I got back to the hotel, I insisted on our Friday night movie tradition and we combined it with the Irish whiskey that Killian bought me. Let's just say, Irish whiskey didn't agree with me. Hopefully, I'd have better luck with the Irishman.

I scoffed, laughing silently at my stupid play on words.

Autumn was behind me, tugging at my laces. "Stop moving," she grumbled.

"This dress was a bad idea," I muttered, trying to breathe in through my nose and out through my mouth.

I swayed on my feet. Jesus, there was no way I was still drunk. Was there? I only had like three glasses of that shit.

"Branka, stop moving," Autumn repeated. My eyes flicked to the mirror and met her hazel eyes. She seemed nervous. Fidgety even.

"Are you alright?" she asked, chuckling nervously.

"The question is whether you're alright," I retorted dryly. "You're fidgety."

She was less nervous at her own wedding.

I watched her swallow and force a smile on her face. "It's your big day."

I blinked. Her explanation made no sense. "You weren't nervous on your big day. That was barely a month ago. Why are you nervous now?"

She wore a pink, sleeveless dress. Goosebumps broke over her naked skin. Ever since the Middle East, she was often cold. Her hair was up in a fancy bun, but she opted for no makeup.

She tightened the last lace and I swayed again.

"Are you sure you're not trying to kill her?" Juliette remarked dryly.

I flicked Juliette a glance, then returned to meet Autumn's gaze in the mirror. Guilt flickered in her hazel eyes, but before I could even open my mouth, the door opened and Alessio walked in with my nephew.

"We found our women," Alessio announced victoriously. He looked so much happier since Autumn and he got together. He smiled more. Even

laughed sometimes.

He walked over to his wife and pressed a kiss on her cheek. “Love.” Autumn’s lips curved into a big smile. She glowed when he was around. “How is our princess?”

Their eyes lowered to Autumn’s belly and Alessio’s hand came to rest on her stomach. Little Alessandra would be with us in another few months.

“She’s being good. No kicking or pressing on my bladder,” Autumn announced.

“She’s going to be a good baby,” I told my brother. “Just as Kol was. Isn’t that right buddy?”

Kol grinned and Autumn’s hand ruffled his dark hair. “Just like their daddy.”

My stomach revolted and an acidic taste filled my mouth.

“Oh, God,” I muttered, and covered my mouth as nausea traveled up my throat.

“The trash can!” Autumn screamed. “Don’t get it on your dress.”

Juliette grabbed the waste bin next to her, and I met her halfway across the room before I threw up. Morning coffee and more alcohol. Jesus.

“Gross.” Kol grimaced.

Autumn rubbed my back as I puked up my guts. Acid singed my throat while Juliette held my dress back to ensure I didn’t get anything on it. I threw up everything in my stomach, retching even when there was nothing left.

“Irish whiskey is not for me,” I muttered, wiping my mouth with the back of a hand. “It’s poison.”

This was not a good start to the day or this marriage. *Maybe it’s a sign*, my mind whispered.

Juliette chuckled. “It takes a bit to build the stomach for it,” she mused. “Trust me, my first few times were brutal. Now I can drink most men under the table.”

“Good to know,” I croaked, then headed to the sink. I brushed my teeth, washed my hands, and then turned to find my brother waiting.

He shook his head. “Seems your bachelorette party was wilder than Killian’s?”

I rolled my eyes. “Did he have strippers?” I asked curiously.

He shrugged. “No. He ended up working through it.” My brows furrowed. Who worked through their bachelor party? “Ready?” he asked

skeptically.

No. I smiled. “Yes.”

The soft piano notes vibrated through the cathedral. A cold sweat trickled down my spine, my fancy wedding gown was too goddamn heavy. In retrospect, I wished I picked something less elaborate. My hands were clammy, one gripping my brother’s sleeve and the other gripping my bouquet.

A bouquet of red roses.

Sneeze. Another sneeze.

Hundreds of pairs of eyes turned to watch me. Killian stood in front of the altar, his dark hair reflecting a few rays of sun shining through the stained glass window. His eyes were on me, but I wondered if he saw me. Really saw *me*.

Even my brother didn’t really see me. He loved me but he only saw the fragile little girl in me. Not the woman I had become. A survivor.

The violins of *Canon in D* drifted through the church. My legs felt heavier than lead as I took the first step. The dress weighed me down, dragging behind me and my lungs squeezed.

I’m doing this, my mind whispered stubbornly. *I’m doing this*.

Another step, and another. Each one brought me closer to him and my grip on Alessio’s sleeve tightened.

I focused on Killian’s blue eyes. The wrong shade of blue. *A better shade of blue*, I immediately corrected myself. Panic bit at my veins and rose with each step I took.

He’s not looking at me like Alessio looked at Autumn, my stupid heart whispered.

A shuddering breath left me. I was only five feet away when a man stepped out of the pew, his back broad, and my step immediately halted. Leather jacket. Jeans. Fucking ass to drool over. I’d recognize that ass anywhere.

“Ladies and gentlemen,” Sasha announced, his voice booming through the church. “Please go home.” The psychotic mobster was making theatrics in the church, even taking a bow. As if the audience at my wedding was here for him. Not me. “There won’t be a wedding happening today.”

I blinked, then blinked again. The words finally sunk in.

He. Did. Not.

The gasps of shock and murmurs echoed through the church, traveling faster than lightning.

“What in the fuck are you doing?” Alessio’s voice vibrated with so much restrained anger, I thought he’d kill Sasha. Right here and now. I overheard Autumn telling my brother it wasn’t appropriate to bring a gun to your sister’s wedding, but wasn’t sure whether he’d agreed or not.

So I waited, holding my breath while my ears buzzed.

Sasha grinned. That unhinged way about him was wide open for everyone to see. He never bothered hiding it, except when he was alone with me.

“I thought it was obvious,” he said, his tone bored and lazy. Sasha aimed a gun at my brother’s skull, his hand steady and his finger on the trigger. “But if you need fucking clarification, I’m kidnapping the bride.” He grinned then added, “Your sister.”

More gasps. Loud murmurs. Pointed fingers. The murmurs of the audience faded as my ears buzzed.

“Sasha, let the girl go.” Vasili, the oldest Nikolaev brother, showed up out of nowhere. “Remember your promise.”

“There’s an expiration date on that shit,” Sasha remarked, his tone cold. “This has nothing to do with you.” Sasha tilted his chin towards Alexei who still sat in the pew without any intention of moving, his arm hanging around his wife’s shoulder. “Nor you.”

“Minding my own business,” Alexei noted dryly. “Don’t point that gun at my wife and we won’t have a problem.”

“Or maybe I could arrest him, put him in prison and throw away the key,” Alexei’s wife chimed in. “It’d save us trouble at family gatherings.”

The Nikolaev family was fucking crazy. With a capital C. Jesus fucking Christ.

Killian went to move, but Sasha produced another gun out of nowhere. “I wouldn’t if I were you.” He fixed his cold stare on him. His eyes were cold enough to freeze the entire church. “You have no idea how much I want to.”

Killian didn’t have a gun on him. It was one of my conditions. No guns on our wedding day.

How was I to know we’d need a gun in a church? Jesus Christ!

“Are you out of your goddamn mind?” Killian growled. His fury burned, dark and dangerous, and for the first time since I met Killian, I

could see the ruthless man under his charismatic exterior.

“Wynter, he’s your fucking lunatic friend. Stop him.” Juliette’s voice screeched from somewhere but I didn’t dare to look away. I was scared the psychotic mobster would shoot someone if I wasn’t staring at him.

“Sasha, think about-” Vasili didn’t get to finish his sentence.

“For fuck’s sake,” Killian’s father spat out. Liam Brennan was the classic definition of a hot daddy. If I didn’t have my issues, I’d totally be into him. Obviously his wife felt the same because she was even younger than me. “Why is it every time you show up somewhere, Nikolaev, there’s fucking trouble?”

Sasha shrugged. “Are you trying to hurt my feelings?” he said, but it was clear by the way he didn’t even spare Liam a glance that he didn’t fucking care either way.

My brother, on the other hand, was fuming. I was hot in this damn dress to begin with, but the heat radiating off Alessio was boiling me alive.

As if he read my thoughts, Sasha took a step forward, his one gun aimed at Killian, while his other one was pointed at Alessio’s chest.

“Sasha!” Autumn exclaimed, showing up out of nowhere. She came to stand in between the two men, and Sasha’s gun was barely an inch away from her chest. That sent Alessio into a fucking rage.

“I’m going to tear you apart for pointing that fucking gun at my wife,” Alessio growled, as he reached for his wife, shoving her behind him.

It was all Sasha needed. Before I could blink, his hand with those inked symbols wrapped around my wrist and pulled me to him, then continued pointing the gun at my brother.

“There we go,” he drawled lazily. “Now you are where you should be.”

“Let go of me,” I hissed, jerking against him.

“Nice dress by the way,” he grinned, but something dark lurked in those pale blue eyes. “I look forward to ripping it to shreds.”

“Don’t you fucking dare. It’s Chanel,” I hissed. “You touch me and you’re a dead man.”

“Oh, kotyonok, I’m already touching you,” he said, pressing his mouth against my ear and his big body at my back.

Killian took a step forward, fury on his face. “I’m going to end you for this, Nikolaev.”

Sasha let out a sardonic breath between his teeth. “I’d like to see you try.”

Killian produced a knife from his holster. “Don’t Killian,” I protested. I wasn’t sure if I did it to protect him or Sasha and I didn’t have it in me to evaluate it.

With Autumn securely behind his back, Alessio’s eyes flicked to Ricardo who never made any promises to come to church without a gun. The latter threw his gun through the air and Alessio caught it, then pointed it at Sasha.

“Sasha, step the fuck away from my sister before you find pieces of your tiny psychotic brain splattered all over the floor,” he threatened, taking a step towards him.

I didn’t doubt that Alessio wouldn’t think twice about throwing himself at Sasha and getting shot, then ensuring he killed the crazy asshole before he bled out.

My throat tightened. My chest heaved.

“Go ahead,” Sasha invited. “Shoot. It’s the only chance you’ll ever get. Use it or get out of my way.”

Alessio’s finger was already on the trigger. My heart thundered so hard against my chest, I found it hard to breathe. The fucking dress was too goddamn tight. My eyes met Autumn’s. Why was that look of guilt still in her eyes?

“Alessio, we can’t kill him,” Autumn tried to reason with my brother. Her hand came to her husband’s forearm, squeezing gently. “Remember, he helped us.”

Sasha grinned. “Listen to your pretty wife,” he purred but his words were tainted with darkness and a maniacal thrill. Almost as if he wanted Alessio not to listen to his wife so he could inflict some pain on him. The drumming of blood in my ears increased.

The vein in Alessio’s neck throbbed and his teeth clenched so hard, I could hear them grinding. I feared my brother would give Sasha the opportunity to unleash his crazy. I’d never forgive him or myself. My brother was my everything.

Before another word could be said, Sasha pointed the gun up at the ceiling and pulled the trigger. *Bang. Bang.*

Screams followed. Debris fell. People started to run. Commotion.

It was exactly what Sasha wanted. I had no idea when he put his gun away but his hands came to my waist and he threw me over his shoulder. I

watched the world upside down, my upset stomach pushing against his shoulder.

“Let me go.” My voice sounded too weak. My chest heaved up and down. I feared I might pass out.

“Never, kotyonok.” His voice was dark, his words menacing. “We’re just getting started.”

I started to bang on his back, kicking and screaming. A sharp sting poked my ass.

And then heaviness pulled me under.

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Chapter Thirty-Six

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SASHA

I discarded the empty syringe on the floor and her body went limp.

Anger shot through me. I hoped for a better greeting from her. She had been avoiding me for fucking months. She was never alone. Either Alessio's men were with her. Or fucking Killian's.

If he had touched her, I'd fucking tear him to pieces.

Peace could go to fucking hell.

And the fucking wedding dress she wore, I couldn't wait to tear it off her.

Annoyance flared in my chest. It pissed me off that she'd put on some princessy dress. For him. When she was mine. She has been mine. And she made a goddamn promise she'd wait.

Did she?

Fuck no.

Maxim already waited for me by the car with the door open. I slid her into the back seat and her wedding dress rode up, baring her smooth, toned thighs and a blue fucking garter.

A growl vibrated in my chest. The thought of Killian skimming his hands up those smooth thighs had me seeing fucking red.

Maxim's attention slid to Autumn's legs and I clenched my teeth. "You know what the quickest way to get your brains blown out is?"

His eyes turned to me. "I'm guessing by looking at her legs."

"That's right."

I slid in the back seat next to her and shifted her head to rest on my lap. The door slammed behind me and Maxim went around and got behind the

wheel.

My eyes lowered to her. I had my share of beautiful women but none of them compared to her. But it was so much more than her beauty. Everything about her spoke to me on a fundamental level. It was like she was made just for me.

I had never hesitated taking what was offered to me. Women threw themselves into my arms. I fucked them. My way. The hard way. But with her, I couldn't stomach using her. Or hurting her.

For some reason the fire that burned in me, threatening to ignite into an inferno and wreak havoc on this world, started and ended with her.

God must have been laughing at my crazy ass when he put a grown-up Branka Russo in my path. The girl that hated to be touched. She was more than happy to touch me, but I've watched her long enough to know she fucking hated to be touched by men.

And there was nothing more I wanted to do then tie her up and fuck her.

I pushed my fingers through her hair and started to unpin all the clips in her thick mane. What a ridiculous, pompous hairdo! It was nothing like her. It made me wonder who in the fuck suggested it.

Discarding the pins on the floor of the rented car, I watched her flawless face. Long, dark eyelashes that rested on her porcelain cheeks. Full, parted lips. She looked so fucking innocent but she had a mouth on her. I'd heard her firsthand plenty of times.

Women usually lost their tongue around me. But not Branka Russo.

She met me head on. Every. Single. Fucking time.

It'd be her downfall one day.

Maxim drove us to the Whole Foods parking lot on the Upper West Side of New York and pulled up next to the motorcycle. It only took an hour to get from the fucking cathedral to here. It was the reason our getaway wouldn't happen via car.

I glanced at the motorcycle. I was more of a sport bike kind of guy and this was a Harley. Not my favorite but it would do.

"You bring your psychotic family to our door, and you'll have more than the Brennans and the Ashfords to worry about," Maxim announced, his eyes on Branka. He really wanted to lose his fucking eyes. "You started a clusterfuck. An even bigger one than you usually manage to stir."

I met his dark gaze in the rearview mirror. "Did I ask your opinion?" He shook his head. "Then don't give it. You and your brother have a debt to

pay. You've paid yours. Your brother will pay his debt. Now spare me your fucking wisdom."

He scoffed. "He's my brother and this is repaying a favor. It doesn't diminish who or what he is."

He threw the keys to the Harley over his shoulder.

I caught them.

He exited the car, as I remained sitting, waiting for Branka to wake up.

I ran a thumb across her parted lip.

"I told you to keep your promise, *moy kotyonok*."

The nickname suited her. She had claws.

"I'm out of here," Maxim grunted, his eyes flicking to Branka. "Don't forget that my debt is paid. Don't fucking call me again… ever."

Yet, he didn't move, his eyes locked on Branka. His expression went grim and my sixth sense flared. But then it disappeared and he turned around.

I watched Maxim's back as he disappeared, then returned my attention to Branka's sleeping face.

The irony didn't escape me. He helped me kidnap my woman while I was unsuccessful in saving his. A reluctant truce. All because his Pakhan, who happens to be his brother, didn't want a war with the Nikolaevs. Smart man. He knew our strength rivaled his and war between our families would weaken him.

And that was never a good thing when you were the head of a criminal organization.

We became indebted and we collected debts. Round and round we fucking go.

Until someone falls.

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Chapter Thirty-Seven

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BRANKA

My mouth felt dry, my tongue heavy. My hair stuck to my face and I reached to move it, but couldn't move. My mind clouded with confusion as I tried to remember when I went to sleep.

Was I married? Did I drink too much at my wedding reception?

I peeled my eyelids open, blinking against the glimpse of light. I shifted to move and a low moan slipped past my lips.

Big hands cupped my cheeks and pale blue eyes sent a shiver down my spine. I closed my eyes, then opened them again. The same pale blue eyes.

"You're awake. Good."

Sasha's voice. Jesus, was this a dream? More like a nightmare.

"What– " I rasped, but my voice faltered. I shifted again, but the sound of shredding material had me jerking into an upright position. My heartbeat trembled when I saw my wedding dress cut right below my knees. "What are you doing?"

"I hate the fucking dress." The indifference in his voice froze my blood. I tensed, then shifted away from him. He didn't allow me any space between us as he shredded another piece of material from my dress.

To my horror, tears blurred my vision.

"Well, my almost-husband loved it," I lied. I had no fucking idea if Killian loved it or not. He was hard to get to know.

He discarded a piece of my dress on the car floor and slid off my heels. He reached for a pair of boots and handed them to me.

"Put these on," he demanded.

“No,” I breathed, my brain still a bit hazy from whatever he shot into me. “Take me back,” I demanded.

He chuckled. Dark and threatening. “I don’t think so. Put these on, or I’ll do it for you.”

I went to move and winced at the pain that shot through me. My muscles tightened.

“Did I get married?” I breathed, my memory hazy.

“What do you think?” he drawled, twisting the knife in his hands. It was stupid, but I wasn’t scared. Maybe the drugs in my system counteracted my reason. Or maybe I was just plain stupid when it came to this man?

I played with the monster and tried to tame it. But a monster couldn’t be tamed. Everyone knew that.

“Are you insane?” I hissed, although my own voice was giving me a headache.

He tossed the knife and it flew through the small space of the vehicle until it landed back in his hands. “Depends who you ask.”

“You couldn’t have figured out a subtle way to kidnap me?” I retorted dryly, thankful that the knife didn’t stab him through his palm. Or even worse, me.

He just shrugged. “It was subtle. Nobody got shot.” This man was a pure psychopath. I couldn’t believe I actually thought him attractive. Ever.

“It was televised, you fucking moron,” I spat back at him. I was so tempted to wring his neck. Senator Ashford’s attendance at the wedding brought in reporters.

His one eyebrow shot up, though he still didn’t look worried. “Oh, was it? Fuck, that’s unfortunate.”

“My brother will murder you,” I growled. “So will Killian.”

He threw back his head and laughed. He actually laughed. Bastard. “I’d like to see either one of them try.” Then his pale gaze locked on me. “Little warning, kotyonok. I won’t spare them if they try. Specially that Irish fucker.”

My teeth clenched so hard my jaw hurt. Conceited bastard.

“If you don’t take me back right now,” I gritted. “I’m going to kill you.”

He flashed me that grin that I used to find so damn sexy. Thrilling and dangerous but also panty-meltingly sexy.

“Careful, kotyonok, or I’ll think you like me.”

“I. Hate. You.”

“No, you don’t.”

“Give me a knife and you’ll see that I do.”

“By the way, I got your present.” I rolled my eyes. Fucking Russian was bouncing from topic to topic, giving me whiplash.

“I didn’t send you a present, moron.”

“That love note was so fucking romantic, I got a hard-on.”

“What the fuck are you talking about?” I sneered. “I’d never do anything romantic for you. Because, you’re psychotic.”

“The heart. Jason's heart.” I stilled. “And the message in blood. In Russian nonetheless. Such a fucking turn on.” Okay, that was definitely not my intent. It was supposed to be a warning. “And you wonder why I came for you. You practically begged me. You were speaking my love language.”

I stared at him in shock and my mouth dropped. He thought sending him a human heart and the message in blood stating he’d be next was romantic. He was even more unhinged than I thought. Jesus Christ. And I wanted to sleep with him.

The term psychopath didn’t even scratch the surface on describing Sasha Nikolaev.

Then he tilted his head pensively, as if he was debating something, until he finally spoke, “I’m gonna have to do something as romantic as that.” He grinned as if pleased with himself. “I’m going to give you a heart too.”

I blinked. No fucking way. Someone save me from this Sasha nightmare.

“You could give me yours,” I retorted dryly. “That would make us even. I might even carve my initials in it.”

He grinned as if he thought it was a great idea. “Baby, your initials have been carved into my heart for a long time. But you got it. What my kotyonok wants, she gets. Let me just line up a heart transplant. I’ll find a matching donor.”

My mouth dropped. It fucking dropped. PSYCHO!

First, he actually thought I’d kill a man to send him a message. Moron.

Of course, Jason was well on his way back to the Middle East to serve his next tour. Okay, maybe my joke wasn’t exactly normal, but I didn’t kill him.

Secondly, the thought of killing Sasha Nikolaev, even after what he had done over the last twenty-four hours, was strangely unsettling. Damn him!

“Now put those boots on, or you won’t like what comes next.”

Without another word, I snatched up the boots and slipped them on.

“You could have gotten me some socks, cheapo creepo,” I snapped as I laced them up.

“Not to worry. You’ll have everything you need where we’re going.”

I held his stare and bit my lip. Hard.

There was no sense in arguing with him. Talking with Sasha was like playing Russian roulette and there was no telling who’d win.

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Chapter Thirty-Eight

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SASHA

I eyed her critically.

It would have to do. Boots and a white, slightly shredded dress that no longer resembled a wedding dress. Not the best combo but it'd be better than having her ride on the back of a bike in all that fucking lace. She'd kill us both with it.

"You ruined a hundred thousand dollar dress," she spat, noticing that I was studying her.

"I did you a favor," I told her coldly. "Get on the bike."

Her eyes darted to the Harley then to me. Back to the bike. "I don't think so."

"Here are some rules," I stated calmly. She'd get on that bike if I had to tie her to me. "When I issue an order, you say 'yes, sir,' and do it with a smile. No more rebelling. You had your freedom and time to grow your wings. Now I want your submission. Understood?"

She scoffed. "Are you for real? You can't tell me what to do, you fucking Russian."

I ignored her sarcasm. "You'll get on that bike or I'll tie you up and then put you on it myself. You try anything, I'm going to go after your brother and his lovely wife."

"Alessio would kick your fucking ass," she sneered.

"Like I said, kotyonok," I drawled. "I'd like to see him try. Trust me, you don't want to test the theory."

If I knew one thing about Branka, it was her love and loyalty for her brother and her best friend. So I'd use that against her.

When she said nothing else, I grinned satisfied. I pulled the handle of the door, opened it and exited the car.

I straddled the Harley and extended my hand. “Let’s go.”

Ignoring my hand, she hiked up her leg and threw it over the seat, then straddled me from behind. And all the while she mumbled curses under her breath. Her hands came around my waist and instantly my dick responded.

Fuck, it’d be a long ride.

I slid my helmet on and hers followed. Then I roared the bike to life and found my way out of the underground garage. The best way to leave the city was by motorcycle. By now Alessio and Killian would have the description of the car. They’d never expect us on a motorcycle.

I drove slowly in and out of traffic, never once going over the speed limit or breaking the law. I didn’t want to appear in a rush to escape.

“This is worse than Driving Miss Daisy.” Branka's grumbling came through the helmet speaker. “Aren’t you worried you’ll get caught?”

“Don’t you worry, kotyonok,” I drawled. “We’ll get out of here.”

“And there goes my hope,” she grumbled.

I turned off our communication and dialed up Alexei.

“Da.” Yes.

“What’s the best route from New York City to New Orleans?”

“Do I want to know?” His cold, raspy voice came through the line.

“Ne.” He definitely didn’t want to know.

“That was some performance in the church,” he remarked in his cold, dry tone. “You should try theater.”

“Fuck you.”

His raspy chuckle came over the phone. “I’m guessing you’re not giving the woman back.”

“No.”

I let my answer fill the silence. There was no sense in explaining. She was mine. Nothing more. Nothing less.

“Go through Pennsylvania to West Virginia, then Tennessee and keep going south until Louisiana.”

“Maybe I should take a train,” I muttered.

“Let me guess, you’re on a motorcycle.”

“You guessed right, brat.” *Brother*. His silence was expected. He rarely voiced his opinion or disappointment. If I called Vasili, I’d never hear the end of it.

“Sasha.”

“Hmm.”

“Stay at crappy hotels, not the fancy ones.”

The line went dead.

WE RODE for six hours when I finally pulled up in front of a motel in Pennsylvania. Not a total dump, but pretty fucking close.

I took Alexei’s advice. Nobody knew how to stay under the radar better than my brother. It was already dark outside and riding a bike in the dark was a damn hassle.

I paid cash and took the keys from the receptionist. When I came out of the little lobby, Branka was still seated on the bike. She had removed her helmet, but other than that, she remained immobile.

“You gonna stay on the bike all night?” I asked curiously. “I didn’t realize you loved motorcycles so much.”

She glared at me. “I can’t fucking move,” she gritted. “My legs are stiff.”

I blinked and my gaze traveled down her legs, then back up to her face. She attempted to lift her leg and winced. Her body stiffened and I walked the ten feet to her, then lifted her off the bike and into my arms.

“Ouch,” she whimpered.

“You have to toughen up if you're going to kill me,” I remarked dryly.

Her hands wrapped around my neck and she held on as I strode to the room. “Don’t worry. I heal quickly. I’ll kill you sooner or later.”

I shook my head as I carried her. When I opened the door, Branka immediately cursed.

“Are you fucking kidding me?” she hissed.

Sitting in the middle of the room was a bed with an old fashioned iron headboard. It looked like bars of jail cell.

How damn appropriate. Then to sweeten the deal, there was one bed for the two of us.

We might even stay two nights, I thought to myself smugly.

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Chapter Thirty-Nine

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BRANKA

This day was getting worse by the hour.

First, a kidnapping. Now one bed.

"Go back and demand a room with two beds," I ordered. Me in the same bed as Sasha was bad news. My body had a mind of its own when it came to this man.

"Why would I do that?" he retorted.

"Because there are two of us," I said flatly.

"Worried you won't be able to keep your hands off me?" he drawled lazily, his tone deceptively light.

I snickered. "I wouldn't touch you with a ten foot pole."

His presence filled every corner of this crappy motel room, making it feel even smaller. The heat radiated from his body, burning my skin. And the look in his eyes had sparks dancing across every inch of my skin.

A smug, knowing smile curved his lips. I suspected he might have gotten one bed on purpose. I wouldn't put anything past him.

"The bed is big enough," he pointed out. "For the two of us."

"Sasha, I'm not sleeping in the same bed as you," I gritted. "And what is it with you stopping at this shithole? You can't afford a Holiday Inn at least?"

Ignoring me, he shut the door behind us, kicking it with his leg.

Dropping me on the bed, my body bounced on the mattress. Once. Twice.

"I really dislike you," I muttered.

He didn't miss a beat. "You'll learn to like me."

My gaze settled on the tattoos on his fingers. My captor. This was a scenario I never could have imagined.

“No, I won’t.”

Sasha’s eyes narrowed on me and an unpleasant tension sucked up all of the oxygen. I thought I saw something obscure pass through his eyes. My chest squeezed tight as Sasha remained silent, watching me. As if he was contemplating how to tear me down.

Little did he know, I wasn’t a little girl. “Sasha, release me,” I attempted to reason with him. “Let me go back. I’ll tell my brother that I owed you something and we settled it. He won’t come after you if he sees I’m back, safe and sound.”

“Tell me, kotyonok,” he continued like I hadn’t spoken. “Has he touched you?” My eyes flickered to find his pale blue ones studying me. I pressed my lips into a thin line, refusing to answer.

“Has. He. Touched. You?” His voice was cool, but darkness crept into each syllable.

I refused to answer again. His jaw ticked and he leaned closer, his big body towering over mine. His hand fisted in my hair and he gripped it, tilting my head back.

“He will pay if he has touched you.” I exhaled as he tugged my head back further so I’d look him in the eyes. “I’ll skin him alive if you have touched him. And when I’m finished with him, his head will sit on my mantle.”

I swallowed. “You’re crazy.”

“Kotyonok, you haven’t seen crazy yet,” he said, his mouth against my ear.

I couldn’t believe I actually found this man attractive at one point. He was disturbed.

I attempted to shift away from him. He followed. He took both my wrists into his big hand and raised them above my head.

“What are you doing?” I asked, following his movements.

He smiled harshly. “I can’t have my bride running away in the middle of the night.”

His bride? He didn’t mean that literally. Right?

“Wait,” I stopped him. “I need to use the restroom. And I need a shower. Won’t you at least give me something to eat? You can’t starve me.”

His gaze found me, containing a warning. “You try to run and I’ll make you regret it.”

Jesus Christ.

This man was more than just disturbed. He was certifiably insane.

My eyes flashed with resentment, but I pressed my lips together, holding my response between my lips. He pulled me up into a seated position. The mattress dipped under our weight. I shot out of bed, ignoring the pain between my thighs, while Sasha was right behind me.

For someone so big, he moved with surprising grace. I rushed to the bathroom, but before I could close the door in his face, his palm came to press against it and he stopped the door from closing with his foot.

“I’m not going to the bathroom with you watching,” I protested.

He studied me, like he was reading my mind and plans. I kept my expression blank, my heart thundering hard in my chest.

“Don’t make me regret it,” he warned, releasing the door and moving his leg out of the way.

Without another word, I slammed the door in his face.

I relieved myself, then washed my hands and face. I left the sink running and I quickly dried my hands off, then surveyed the small bathroom. There was a single window behind the yellow tub. It wasn’t big but I could squeeze through it.

Probably. Maybe.

My heartbeat drummed in my ears and adrenaline rushed through my veins. If Sasha caught me, he’d be mad. Furious.

I didn’t give a shit. I wouldn’t just sit and take whatever he dished out. I gave my word to Killian and that was that.

Sasha could go fuck himself. I waited for him. He didn’t wait for me. He broke his promise.

Two way street, fucker.

The asshole was crazy if he thought I’d just go back to him like nothing had happened. All was fair in love and the mafia. So yeah, go to fucking hell, Satan’s spawn.

The images of Wynter Flemming and Sasha rolled through my mind. Like an addict picking at a sore, I looked them up more than I cared to admit. They always seemed familiar and *happy* together. The pain radiated throughout my chest and spread until it wrapped around my lungs and squeezed. Agonizingly *tight.*

No, I wasn’t jealous. Sasha didn’t wait for me and my everything unhinged mobster induced haze has cleared. I couldn’t forgive him for leaving me behind too. For making me wait, only for me to find him with Wynter.

Sasha should have waited for me too. It was too late now. He’d lost me.

Climbing into the bathtub, I opened the window. Slowly and as silently as I could. Then I pushed off the edge of the tub and jumped up. My hand grabbed the window frame, the sharp ends digging into my palm. Ignoring the pain, I pushed off the wall and rose higher and higher, until my body was hanging out of the window.

I eyed the ground as I hung upside down. It was the only way. I’d have to let myself fall and hope I didn’t smash my face. Hoping for the best, I pushed myself further out and then started falling. It seemed I was falling for forever, but in fact it was only a second or two.

I twisted my body so I’d fall on my shoulder rather than my face. The moment my body hit the ground, a grunt escaped me. That fucking hurt.

“Going somewhere, kotyonok?” The voice was low and soft, but it scared me more than if he would have shouted. My heart trembled and my breath shook, but I kept my cool.

Everything with Sasha was like playing Russian roulette. One wrong move, one wrong word, and I’d be dead.

Rolling onto my side, I found him casually leaning against the building, his arms folded across his chest.

I held his stare stubbornly, refusing to cower. If my father hasn’t succeeded in breaking my spirit, neither will this pale blue eye devil.

“Yeah, running away from you and your unhinged, psychotic ass,” I grumbled.

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Chapter Forty

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SASHA

Panting, her eyes lifted up until they met mine.

Leaning against the building and my arms folded, I studied her. She kept surprising me. She definitely wasn't going for damsel in distress. And fuck, she looked hot. Her torn wedding dress offered a glimpse of her curvy, smooth legs and her thighs. That fucking garter was still on there. I pictured myself shredding it to pieces with my teeth.

Would it scare her?

I wasn't sure, but I knew my cock wanted to tear through her pussy and fuck her until she screamed my name for the whole world to hear.

As if she could see the images playing in my mind, Branka's cheeks flushed crimson. Or maybe my little wildling was picturing similar erotic images in her own mind.

A noise had her gray eyes darting in its direction and she opened her mouth, ready to scream.

Before she could scream, I squatted down and covered her mouth with my hand. She bit into my palm, but the pain was welcome. It made me focus on that, rather than my rock-hard dick.

She fought against me, but her size didn't compare to mine. She looked like a little child in a giant's hands.

"No one can save you from me," I whispered in her ear, biting her earlobe. Hard. To my surprise, she moaned. Promising sign. "Not God. Not the devil." Then to ensure she understood I meant it, I tilted her face to me, my fingers digging into her cheeks and all the while, my palm still covered her mouth. "You're mine now."

Anger flared in her eyes, her eyes turning into molten silver. Just like they did when she was aroused. It was addictive to see her like this.

“I’m not yours,” she spat out, her voice muffled.

Aggravation lit in my chest. I wanted her neck deep in this relationship. Like I was.

Relationship, my mind mocked. This didn’t seem anything like my brothers had going on. Although I never asked for details.

Blyad!

Fucking bullshit. I didn’t need these pussy-whipped feelings. I just needed her naked underneath me, submitting to me, her nails on my back and my cock deep in her pussy.

Simple.

That I understood. That was what I’d stick to.

“You are mine, kotyonok,” I drawled. “Now and forever.”

Her eyes flashed with so much fury, I expected thunderbolts to strike me. “I’m not yours,” she hissed like a wildcat. “You’re not good enough for me. You can’t force someone to be yours.”

Tears glistened in her eyes. Her words struck, but her tears unnerved me. More than anything else I had ever experienced. And I’d experienced a lot in my lifetime.

A whisper of tension tightened in my body and I forced a grin to my face. The one that scared men and terrified women.

“But you can force someone to uphold their promise,” I said, then lifted her up and threw her over my shoulder. Her fists pounded against my back and I rolled my shoulders.

“That feels good, kotyonok,” I announced. “Like a Swedish massage.”

“Fuck Swedish massage,” she spat out, but her fists stilled. I could practically feel her fuming.

Back in the room, I let her body slide down my chest, then in one efficient move, I ripped her wedding dress off.

A gasp filled the small space between us and her hands instinctively covered her flimsy strapless, push-up bra and a thong. Fascinated, I watched the vein in her neck throb and it took all of my years of practiced restraint not to pounce on her.

I was so fascinated with her fucking neck that I nearly missed her movement. She attempted to knee me in the groin. Again. I caught her knee and held it tightly.

“Unless you want to be fucked - thoroughly and roughly tonight - you won’t try that again,” I warned her with a growl. A healthy dose of fear wouldn’t hurt this wildcat.

Her eyes widened and her lips parted. But no fear entered her expression. *Good.* At least something good came out of it.

“Unless you *want* to be fucked,” I drawled lazily. Fuck, my cock was getting harder by the second.

Molten silver. Lust filled eyes. Yes, my kotyonok wanted to be fucked.

“I do want to be fucked,” she responded and my dick was already onboard. Her sweet smile should have been my warning. “By Killian. Definitely not by you.” The unsettling sensation brought anger to the forefront. I shoved it somewhere deep down. Obsession was dangerous. Especially for the Nikolaev men. When we lost our heads, the world burned. People died.

“Now, take me back so I can have my wedding night,” she demanded, pleased with herself. If she only knew what thoughts ran through my mind, she’d stop smiling like that.

“Don’t push me,” I warned, my voice lowering to a dangerous level. “Killian was never the one for you,” I deadpanned. By the look on her face, she knew it too. “Now, if you want my cock, you're gonna have to earn it. And we’ll do it when the time is right.”

Jesus, I didn’t know how many more days of blue balls I could handle. If she didn’t cave in soon, I’d lose my balls.

“I don’t want you,” she croaked, her tone breathy. Then as if she wanted to convince herself because I knew she was fooling herself. “Jerk face,” she added.

She wants me, I thought smugly.

A dark chuckle filled my chest. “Liar.”

Her eyes narrowed and defiance glared back at me. There was hope for us. “Get on the bed.”

“W-what?” she stuttered. “I don’t want to have sex with you.”

I swooped her up and threw her onto her back, the mattress bouncing her body. “I’m tying you up.”

“No.” She turned onto her stomach to crawl away from me, but I grabbed her ankle and dragged her down, then rolled her onto her back.

“Stop it,” I growled, then straddled her hips. “I’m just tying you up.”

Well, if I thought that would calm her down, I was dead wrong. She started to buck like a fucking wild horse. And I was definitely not a champion in bull riding. I grabbed her wrists and put them above her head.

“Let me go,” she begged. Her tone was a bit softer, but she kept kicking, her breathing harder by the second. “I won’t run again,” she promised, but I didn’t believe her.

The fear of losing her and this time not being able to reach her was too raw.

I held her wrists above her head with one hand as I reached for my belt and pulled it out in one swift move. I watched as she turned her head to the side and just as I thought she’d finally calm down, she sank her teeth into my forearm.

“Stop fighting me or you’ll change my mind and I *will* fuck you,” I threatened, pushing my hips into her. “I’ll push deep inside your tight pussy and let it strangle my cock. You’ll scream *my* name all night long.”

My hard dick brushed against her lower belly and she instantly stilled. Her gray eyes locked with mine, darkening.

The glimpse of fear in them just about gutted me. I stilled. I never wanted to see her scared. I’d protect her from everyone and anyone. Even myself.

“I won’t hurt you, kotyonok,” I murmured softly, though anger was still raw in my veins. At her.

She thought she could have married Killian, walk away from me. Forget about me. It left me feeling hollow. Unworthy. Unlovable.

Fuck! This was so much worse than being pussy whipped. My cock hadn’t even been inside her cunt and I was already losing my shit. I met her gaze and the soft look in her eyes rushed all the blood to my dick. The anger dissipated, leaving me throbbing with lust for her. My cock might fall off if I didn’t get inside her soon.

Running my hands down her body and cupping her ass, I molded the soft flesh to fit my palms.

“I'll never hurt you,” I vowed, my mouth skimming her soft cheek. “Sometimes pain and pleasure mix, but it will never happen without your consent.”

My hips pushed against her soft body. Branka moaned, her hips arching up, grinding herself mindlessly against me.

“Promise?” Fuck, the vulnerability in her tone could reduce me to a raging lunatic, hunting for anyone who’d dare to hurt her.

“I promise.” I continued trailing my mouth over her neck, then back up her cheeks. Her response to me was intoxicating. “You want it?” I purred softly, then bit her earlobe. She moaned again, her head falling back and giving me full access to her neck. As if she was surrendering.

My body hummed in approval, my cock totally onboard.

“Tell me,” I said coarsely. “Tell me you want my cock inside your tight pussy.”

Her eyes returned to me, she swallowed and for a moment I thought she’d cave.

“No,” she breathed, panting.

“Shame,” I rasped, slightly disappointed. “I was ready to bury my cock deep inside your warm pussy.” Her cheeks blushed. “I bet your cunt is greedy and wants to strangle my cock. Even your mouth wants to taste me.”

She rolled her eyes but she couldn’t hide her lust filled expression. “I want to strangle your neck so you’ll stop talking.”

Her wrists secured, I dipped my head.

“Really?” I teased, as her body twisted underneath me.

Except, she was rubbing all over me instead of pushing away from me. My lips skimmed her neck, then her chest until they came to rest on the thin material of her bra. Her legs parted slightly, welcoming me in. Her breathing labored so I rewarded my wildling. I pushed my pelvis against her clit and a moan filled the room. That soft moan I had been dreaming of for such a long time. I bit her nipple through the material and then licked it to ease the sting.

“It seems my little kotyonok is a liar.” I smiled, meeting her hazed expression. “Because you’re so wet, you’re leaving a stain on my pants even through your panties.”

Her eyes flashed and I shifted off the bed.

“Sleep tight,” I grinned, although it probably came out as a grimace. My balls were aching at this point, desperate for her. “Try to escape again, and I’ll have you sleeping naked and tied up.”

I disappeared into the bathroom with a hard dick, blue balls, and her curses at my back.

When I came back out of the bathroom, I expected her to be asleep. She wasn’t.

She stared sightlessly at the ceiling, refusing to acknowledge me. She was stewing, mad at me for ruining her wedding day. She'd get over it. Killian was all wrong for her. Deep down she knew it too but she stubbornly refused to admit it.

With her wrists still secured, I sat on the side of the bed and mirrored her position minus the tied wrists. I almost regretted tying her up, except I couldn't risk her sneaking out.

A single tear rolled down her cheek and she shook her head. As if she was mad at herself for it.

"Stop crying."

"I'm not crying, jerk face."

Fuck, this wasn't going that great. I hoped she'd be less torn up for not marrying Killian and here she was shedding a tear.

"I'm sorry." I didn't know why I was offering her an olive branch. I couldn't recall the last time I apologized to anyone and here I was. Less than twenty-four hours since I kidnapped her and I was already apologizing.

She smelled so good, like sunshine and fresh spring rain, feeding my desire and obsession. I blamed it on abstinence, but I knew it was all bullshit.

"Why do you want me now?" Her voice was low. "You didn't come back and now–" She let out a shuddering breath. "Now you're bulldozing your way into my life."

Fuck!

The pain in her voice clawed at my chest. The worst part, I caused this one. I couldn't kill the person who caused it because I was the culprit.

Except, I couldn't explain to her I had made another promise. Or that I thrived on control and would have freaked her out with my tendencies.

I turned to look at her profile. She was still staring at the ceiling, refusing to look at me. I sighed and took a strand of her soft hair between my fingers.

"I made a promise to Vasili that I'd keep my distance," I admitted. "I didn't want to put you in harm's way." I let out a dry breath. It would seem my kotyonok and I together were all kinds of fucked up.

Her smell made my head fuzzy. Her pain made my throat tight. Her smile made my heart fucking glow.

"I waited, Branka," I told her. "Did you wait for me?"

She swallowed and turned her head over, her gaze meeting mine. Truthfully, I couldn’t blame her if she hadn’t. One of my mother’s last words was that I wasn’t good enough. I’d never been good enough to love. But fuck, I hoped she waited. I hoped she wanted me as much as I wanted her.

She pulled her gaze back to the ceiling.

It was at that very moment I realized that control and Branka Russo would never go hand in hand. Breaking her spirit was a hard no for me. She was part of my mind, pushing her way in without even trying.

Fuck, this woman was everywhere. In my soul, my heart and mind. She was so deep beneath my skin that I’d never find my way out. Even worse, I didn’t want to find the way out. But the need to control her battled within me so strongly that a cold sweat drifted down my back.

Losing control would lead to a full blown obsession.

Love was an obsession. Passion. Disaster.

And I was well on my way to it.

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Chapter Forty-One

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BRANKA

I woke up to the sun glaring on my face. Squinting my eyes, I twisted around to check out the room.

It was even crappier than I thought. Heavy drapes the color of baby diarrhea. Windows fogged with dirt. The tiled floor was the same shade as the drapes.

I jerked against the belt, twisting my wrists but to no avail. Sasha must have been an expert at tying women with belts.

“I’ve had two decades of using belts as ropes. You won’t get out of it.” Sasha’s voice confirmed my suspicion.

I froze and counted to three before I turned my head to find him sitting next to me, fully dressed and his attention on the phone in his hands.

“Can you untie me?” I spat out. His gaze came my way, unreadable and secretive. I was only in my panties and bra, and it wasn’t exactly warm in this room. Goosebumps rolled over my skin and I shuddered.

“What do you say?”

This motherfucker. I’d make him pay. I’d fucking kill him the first chance I got.

“Please,” I gritted.

His wide smile was my reward. Or punishment, depending on who was looking at it. He tucked his phone back into his pocket and leaned over, loosening the belt in one swift move. He rubbed my wrists, but I jerked my arms away from him.

I rubbed my wrists while keeping my eyes on him. “I need clothes,” I mumbled, sitting up.

He reached to the nightstand and handed me a bag. Cautiously, I dumped the contents of it on the bed. Jeans and a plain white crew neck top. New undergarments. Red leather jacket. At least I wouldn't have to go around stinky today.

"Get dressed," he ordered. "We leave in five minutes."

No coffee. No good morning. No breakfast. Gosh, this guy was a true charmer.

"Can I at least take a shower?"

"Five minutes."

I grabbed the clothes but he yanked them out of my hands. "Take a shower and get back out here."

"But-"

"You can always forgo the shower," he drawled with that smirk on his face.

"You're an ass," I deadpanned.

Narrowed eyes met mine and I held them in challenge. We stared at each other, both of us refusing to break the stare down. Childish, yes. Sane, no.

"Whatever." It was me that ended up caving in. I shook my head and padded to the bathroom. "Fucking ass," I muttered.

Before I shut the door, I heard him say, "Better get used to it because I'm your ass."

But when I glanced over my shoulder, his attention was on his phone.

"Four minutes," he timed without raising his head.

Once in the bathroom, I turned on the shower, stripped out of my undergarments, and stepped under the spray of water.

I let water trickle down my body. The sound of the pipes protested at the pressure and the memory crashed into me like a wave against the shoreline on a windy day.

From my window, I watched Mia's shadow disappear into the night. Mia and Alessio left me. My chest squeezed painfully, it made it hard to breathe. I brought my hand to my chest, rubbing it gently. It didn't bring the relief I hoped for.

I didn't want to be left behind. I wanted to beg him to take me along, but I knew it would make my big brother sad.

Would he still visit now that Mia's gone?

A single tear rolled down my cheek, and I wiped it off before someone could see it. Father hated tears. He'd beat me. I wrapped my hands around me, wishing I'd turn eighteen tomorrow like Mia.

The alarm sounded and I jumped, my eyes darting around. I heard Father's men shouting and dogs barking. Someone kept hitting a pipe, the sound echoing through the night. I couldn't place where it was coming from. Dogs started barking and my bare feet moved silently over the plush rug.

Screaming. Shouts. More screaming. Pipes bursting.

My heart jumped.

I should hide under the bed. Yet, I found myself in the hallway. Shouts drifted through the dark voices. Father roared. Mother cried. More men shouted.

Clank. Clank. Bang!

I leapt back and tripped, losing my balance.

Eyes came my way. Father's. Mother's.

With wide eyes, I let my gaze travel over the group. And a dead body on the floor with blood pooling all around him and dead eyes staring at me. Like he was blaming me.

It was one of Father's guards. The one that allowed us small liberties.

"Did you know?" he roared and my little heart thundered. My body started shaking. "Did you know Mia was leaving?"

I wasn't good at lying. Alessio told me I was a lousy liar. Mia told me so too. Everyone knew it.

Before my brain could process it all, Father grabbed a pipe and hit it against the table.

"Better answer or Mother's going to pay."

My eyes widened and my body began shaking with fear. Mother's blank eyes flickered with something, but she didn't move. Why didn't she move? Why didn't she fight?

Dogs barked in the distance and I prayed. I didn't want them to catch my big brother and Mia.

As if he wanted to test how hard to hit with a pipe, he swung it and hit Mother on the shoulder. She didn't make a sound. I yelped as if he hit me.

That vicious, menacing grimace spread on his face. I hated it. I wanted to claw it off.

"Branka, did you or did you not know?" Father repeated the question.

Neither Alessio nor Mia told me. The only reason I knew was because I eavesdropped. But I couldn't tell Father that. Eavesdropping was bad. Not telling Father that Mia planned on running away was even worse.

I swallowed. "No."

Whack. A scream. Mine.

"I-I didn't know," I cried.

Whack.

"P-please, I-I didn't know."

That night Mother slept in the bed next to me, cradling me and rocking me as I cried. It was usually Mia or Alessio who comforted me. Not Mother in her battered state.

"I'm sorry, Mommy."

Her arms, bruised black and blue, wrapped around me. "We should have all died. He shouldn't have saved you."

I still remembered the sharp pain that sliced through my chest hearing those words. I knew what she was talking about. My big brother never talked about it but Mia told me. How mother tried to commit suicide and take us all with her.

But Alessio saved us all.

I asked my brother once why Mother was always sad. I'd never forget his answer.

"Grief is like waking up in a parallel universe where everything looks the same. But you're not. You become a shadow of your former self, watching the world turn and lose hope that there's something better for you. That's why Mother is sad."

It took me a long time to understand those words.

Mother became a shadow waiting for someone to save her. Probably Senator Ashford. I lingered like a shadow waiting for Alessio and Mia to come back to me. I knew he didn't want to leave without me that night all those years ago. But he did, and it left a mark. I was the shadow during those days, months. Two fucking years.

Sasha said he waited. Indecision pulled me in two different directions. I wanted to believe it, but the part of me who'd been left to linger in the shadows, alone and isolated, way too many times refused to give in.

For the past four years, I was a shadow, just like my mother. I watched the world turn as I waited for Sasha Nikolaev, and drowned in the darkness and loneliness.

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Chapter Forty-Two

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SASHA

I sat on the crappy coffee table, protesting at my weight, in this crappy motel room.

Branka was right, this fucking place was lame. But keeping her with me was more important than the luxury at this moment.

The door to the bathroom opened and she came out. She seemed upset. Without a word, she extended her hand and tapped her foot impatiently. I handed her the clothes and watched her get dressed.

Fuck, she had a beautiful body. One of those timeless, hourglass figures that seduced effortlessly. I watched her round ass bend over as she pulled on her pants, then quickly put her shirt on. Her boots followed. Her hair was up in a low ponytail, I assumed so she'd not have to worry about it with a motorcycle helmet on.

My eyes narrowed at Branka. "What's the matter?"

Her face was pale and ghosts stared back at me through those stormy eyes. It didn't escape me how her bottom lip quivered as she desperately kept it between her teeth.

Branka's hand pushed a strand of hair out of her face as she glared at me.

"I was kidnapped." I raised a brow in a silent 'So' which seemed to have pissed her off even more. "I'm supposed to be married and off on my honeymoon yet here I'm stuck with you, being dragged to who knows where."

I noticed the small tremor in her hand as she tried to push that unruly piece of hair back again. Something had upset her.

My eyes roamed over her outfit. Jeans. White t-shirt. Red leather jacket. Black boots. She looked good. Like a biker chick. My chick.

“If it helps, think of this as *our* honeymoon,” I said, hoping to reassure her.

I failed.

“I want to murder you,” she hissed.

“Are you asking me for my knife so you can murder me?” I questioned coldly. If she wanted to kill me, maybe I’d let her. After she admitted she wanted my cock as much as I wanted her pussy. The two of us together made sense - like the sky and clouds. Oceans and beaches.

She tilted her chin in defiance. “You gonna give it to me?”

My fucking brain forgot the knife and immediately went to an X-rated meaning. My cock took over and images flashed through my brain, giving it to her while she was ass up, head-down on my bed, begging me to fuck her harder and faster.

Blyad.

“Come here,” I ordered.

Her legs obeyed before she realized it and she stopped with an incredulous look. Reaching out, I took her hand and pulled her between my parted knees. I wrapped my arms around her, burying my face into her belly.

Fuck, I wanted her. So fucking much. All of her. I wanted to feast on her, thrust my tongue inside her pussy, and kiss her with violence that would rattle us both and leave us gasping for air.

“Tell me what upset you, kotyonok.”

All I wanted was to make her happy. To have her melt in my arms. To see her smile.

Her lips thinned, a sure sign she wouldn’t tell me. My hands went around her and gripped her ass.

“Do I need to bend you over my knee and spank you?” I threatened softly. A shudder rippled through her and I watched her face for any signs of fear. *Confusion. Anger. Sadness.*

She stared at me, letting me drown in the stormy rain clouds. I pressed my mouth to her belly. Even through her clothes, I could feel her soft skin. I inhaled her scent deep into my lungs, letting it wash over me. She pushed her fingers through my hair, gripping the strands.

I pushed my hand between her thighs. Even through the jeans, her heat seared. I pushed her shirt up, expecting her to stop me. She didn't. My mouth pressed on her soft belly and her soft moan filled the space. Growling, I nipped her soft skin. It pissed me off that I craved her so much.

I snapped the top button of her jeans open, then skimmed my mouth lower. I pushed her jeans lower, trailing it lower and lower with my tongue until I was an inch above her mound. It was then that I felt it. A scar.

Her skin was flawless, except that little scar.

"Who did that?" I growled, lifting my head. A visible shudder rolled through her body.

She didn't answer. Just watched me with those gray eyes. It felt like standing in the field under a stormy sky, summer rain washing over me.

"I'll find out," I vowed. "I'll make them pay."

She swallowed. "He's the only one left," she whispered. "Father is dead."

"I'll kill him," I promised, my voice dark. "Just like I shot your father."

Surprise flashed across her expression, but no regret. No fear.

"I want to kill him." That was my kotyonok. My tigress. Branka and Mia might resemble each other physically with a good heart. But that was where their similarities ended. Branka was so fucking strong. Resilient.

I wanted her to see herself as I saw her. I wanted her to own all of it. The good. The bad. The ugly. Because it made her who she was.

"Which is the real you?" I asked her softly. She sucked in an uneasy breath and her eyes flared with the fire I was used to seeing in her gaze. I lifted my brows in challenge, my eyes piercing her. "You play an outraged prisoner, an obedient sister. A seductive killer. Which is the real you?"

A strangled gasp escaped her. "How–" She gulped. "What–"

I let out a sardonic breath.

"Branka, I'm an expert at hiding. My mother blamed me for Father not loving her," I told her. I could tell her the whole story but I didn't think she was ready. "She called me unlovable." Bu-bum. Bu-bum. I could hear her heartbeat. "So I made myself lovable."

A heartbeat passed and her soft chuckle vibrated between us. I loved the sound of her soft laugh.

"Your mother sounds slightly misguided," she remarked. "But I like your solution."

The corners of my lips tugged up. “She was misguided.” Our eyes held each other’s, heavy feelings brewing between us. She fought them. So did I. “I want to see all of you. The good. The bad. The ugly. All of it. Don’t hide from me, and I won’t hide from you.”

We both knew she hid behind a mask of what others expected her to be.

But I saw her. Now I wanted her to see me.

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Chapter Forty-Three

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BRANKA

We arrived in Louisiana, city unknown, in the middle of the night. The only reason I knew we were in Louisiana was because I saw the sign when we crossed the state line.

Sasha drove like a madman, violating speeding limits and many other traffic laws while I hung on to him for dear life. He loved motorcycles. After all these miles on the back of one, I wasn't quite sure it was my thing.

I had come to the conclusion that Sasha was relentless when he had a goal in mind. And his goal was to get to Louisiana as soon as possible. I assumed he wouldn't get caught by my brother. Alessio might be out of the underworld, but he wouldn't hesitate to use the ruthlessness he grew up with to keep me safe.

The worst part was that this pale eyed devil was peeling all the layers off, leaving me standing naked in front of him. Figuratively and literally.

Nobody had ever seen all these sides of me. I was always careful to hide them. To keep my brother. To keep my best friend.

I didn't want them to think I was anything like my father.

Vengeful. Bloodthirsty. Evil.

Yet, this man *saw* me. Somehow he *knew* me.

Don't hide from me, and I won't hide from you. His words played on repeat in my mind, resonating in my soul.

But fear was a bitch. Anger was an even bigger one.

I WOKE up with an ache in my neck, curled up on the window seat. I couldn't remember how I got here.

Blinking sleep away, I shifted on the little window seat. It took me a moment to remember. I wasn't home. I wasn't in a hotel room nor on a honeymoon. I was stuck in some nightmare with a crazy Nikolaev. An unhinged mobster.

How in the fuck did I get so lucky?

The dawn flickered over the horizon but it was still dark. Slightly disoriented, I blinked and then pushed my hair out of my face. At least I wasn't tied up.

The heavy silence filled the air. No movements. No voices. Nothing.

I almost expected Sasha to sleep in the same room as me, but he wasn't here. The bed was empty. Just for good measure, I stood up and glanced under the bed. It was stupid but you never knew with that maniac.

I slowly opened the drawer. It was fully stocked. I grabbed a red dress, with off-the-shoulder straps. Once dressed, I grabbed my boots since I couldn't find any other shoes. I didn't slip them on. It would be easier to remain quiet if I was barefoot. I slipped out of the bedroom and into the dark hallway. The place was nice. Elegant, yet comfortably decorated. Paintings hung on the walls, but I couldn't distinguish them in the dark.

My steps were soundless against the plush rug. Every few steps, I'd pause and listen. Still nothing. So I'd resume walking, my goal getting to the front door. Last night when we arrived, I made sure to pay attention to my surroundings.

I wouldn't be one of those girls that would sit and wait for someone to rescue me. No fucking way. I'd save myself, thank you very much.

God must have been laughing though because I was barely ten steps down the hallway when a hand wrapped around my neck, pushing me against the wall. A breath escaped me, my lungs squeezing with fear. Or excitement, I was unsure.

"Where do you think you're going, kotyonok?" he mocked, darkly amused. As if he was impressed with my attempt.

"Morning stroll," I breathed.

Pale blue eyes clashed with mine, sucking all of the oxygen out of the room. If I wasn't careful, this man would pull me into his psychotic darkness and then let me drown. He was too intense. It was too easy to fall for his charms. I almost snorted at the thought of Sasha being charming.

Whatever the hell it was, I was under his spell. Like the eye of the hurricane, he was sucking me into a whirlwind of emotions.

“Liar.” His expression turned dark. His grip on my throat tightened slightly and the throbbing in my core intensified. “Always so fucking adamant about leaving. Why? Because you want to return *him.*”

We both knew who *him* was. Sasha Nikolaev either hated Killian or was crazy jealous of him. Probably both.

“I *am* supposed to be married to him,” I retorted dryly. But it was just then that it dawned on me. I hadn’t thought about Killian once since Sasha kidnapped me.

That was… concerning.

Sasha’s knee came between my legs, the friction of his hard muscle against my core sending a thrum through every single cell of my body. Without permission, my body ground against his thigh. My senses were so heightened that I felt lightheaded as my heart drummed hard against my ribs.

My fingers curled against his shoulders, clawing at his t-shirt. “Want to get off?” he rasped, his hot breath against my ear. His thumb brushed against my pulse, then he pressed against it.

Arctic storms brewed in his eyes. But raw desire lurked in them too. His mouth latched on to my neck and bit. Hard.

I should fight him. Tell him to fuck off. Instead a moan slipped through my lips. Pleasure buzzed on my skin and swam through my veins. Sasha’s eyes found mine. They were somehow darker now. A darker shade of blue. I had never seen a storm in the arctic, but I imagined it’d look like his eyes.

“One of these days, I’m going to fill you with my cum,” he growled.

A shudder rolled down my spine at his words. His hand slid down to my breast, then down to my hip. He bunched the skirt of my dress up around my waist. “How many times?”

I blinked in confusion. My thoughts were incoherent, my brain in shambles.

“W-what?”

“How many times did he touch you?” he grunted, his finger rubbing my clit. “How many times did he have you?”

He just couldn’t let that go. Obsessive, psychotic bastard.

I should slap him. Push him away. I didn’t. All those days of bringing me to the brink of an orgasm, only to pull it away. It made me a desperate

woman.

So I ignored his question and closed my eyes. “The thought of him touching you drives me insane. It makes me see red.” He tugged me by the neck and bent his head down until his lips brushed against mine. “Tell me how many times,” he repeated and I opened my eyes, meeting his gaze. My reflection stared back at me. Savage. Consuming. “You have no idea how much I want to go find him and break every bone in his body. Then I’ll cut his cock off for touching what’s mine.”

In one move, he yanked my panties and the shredding sound filled the hallway. He thrust two fingers inside me. A whimper tore from my throat and my body bucked against him.

“That’s right, kotyonok. I can feel your cunt clenching around my fingers.” I dripped all over his fingers, rocking my hips against his hand. “Your pussy knows who owns it. Nobody will ever touch it again.” A whimper ripped from my throat. “This is my pussy.” Thrust. “My property.” Thrust. “You’re mine.”

My core pulsed, the throbbing need burning through my blood. I was so close, the orgasm at my grasp. But just when I was about to come, he pulled out his fingers and my eyes widened.

A frustrated breath left me and echoed through the air.

“You don’t get to cum after trying to leave me,” he grunted.

“You bastard,” I hissed. My fingers curled into fists and I started banging on his chest. “You fucking bastard.”

Scooping me up, he threw me over his shoulder and carried me back to my bedroom. He threw me onto my back and my body bounced on the bed.

He straddled my hips, and I tried to buck him off. This fucking monster was just taunting me. Playing with me. He grabbed my wrists and slammed them above my head. I kept bucking, but he was so heavy. I twisted my head and sank my teeth into his forearm.

“Careful, kotyonok,” he threatened, his voice dark. “Keep that up and you won’t like what comes next.”

I stilled. His body on mine felt so good, like a heavy comforting blanket. And all he kept doing was tormenting me.

Turning my head to the side, I stared stubbornly at the spot on the wall as he bound my wrists and secured it to the headboard.

He ran his lips down my throat. “If you ask me nicely, I’ll make you cum.” My lips pressed into a thin line. “Just say please.”

“Fuck off,” I spat. “Please.”

He left the room, his dark laugh ringing in my ears long after he was gone.

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Chapter Forty-Four

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SASHA

"Are you out of your goddamned mind?"

Vasili slammed the door to his office. To say my brother was pissed off was the understatement of the century. The fucking glass of the building rattled from the slamming door or quite possibly from the force of his voice.

No matter. What's done is done; it was time to move on.

"Do you realize the whole goddamn world watched you kidnap that woman?" he bellowed. "It was fucking televised."

"Hmm, was it?" I snickered. "I would have never guessed from all the news vans out front."

"What in the fucking hell were you thinking, Sasha?" he roared. "Do you know how many fucking assholes I'll have to bribe for this shit?"

I shrugged my shoulders. He didn't have to bribe anyone. I was capable of settling my own scores.

Sitting behind the desk of Vasili's office, I leaned back into the chair and propped up my legs on the table. I picked up the *People* magazine Vasili had on his desk. My fucking brother always had that fucking magazine on his desk, but I had yet to see him read it.

"Put the fucking magazine down," he said through gritted teeth.

"Relax, Brother," I told him. "The bride in distress is safe and sound."

For the most part, I added silently, snickering to myself.

I left her tied to my bed - gloriously naked and sexually frustrated.

Unfortunately, my plan backfired a bit because I'd been going around with a hard dick that refused to get the message that we weren't fucking

anyone today.

“For fuck’s sake, Sasha,” Vasili hissed, barely keeping a rein on his temper. I could see it in the vein throbbing in his neck. The one that his wife couldn’t seem to get enough of because I caught her licking it on more than one occasion. Fucking horny rabbits. Only Isabella found my brother attractive. “Are you trying to start a war? First the whole goddamn thing with Wynter and keeping her away from Liam Brennan. Now this fucking shit!”

And there it was. I was waiting for the moment when he’d bring that up. He and everyone else could go fuck themselves. Wynter, the ice skating princess, needed me, and I would never leave her hanging.

I opened the drawer of Vasili’s desk that I’d taken over and found a piece of bubblegum. The crinkle of the wrapper filled the space, probably grating on Vasili’s nerves, egging him on.

“You said you wanted to see me married,” I drawled lazily, ignoring his jab about Wynter. “So I had to find a bride.”

“I said find a bride, not kidnap one,” he roared.

“Semantics.”

I swore Vasili’s blond hair, so much like mine, almost turned red with rage. And I fucking relished in it.

I threw the gum into my mouth and started chewing. I popped the gum, watching with delight as Vasili’s jaw ticked. He was fucking pissed. No surprise there. I didn’t particularly care for chewing gum, but it was such a goddamn thrill to see the pissed off expressions on people’s faces when I popped it.

So just for good measure, I blew a bubble, waited for it to get a decent size, and popped it again.

Our eyes locked in a battle of wills. The freaky blue eyes we shared stared back at me, probably contemplating my murder. I bet my brother fought the urge to reach across his desk and choke the life out of me. He wanted to so fucking badly, but he’d never hear the end of it from his wife.

It was good to have friends in high places.

The door to his office opened and my sister, Tatiana, strode in wearing a black dress. It had been a year and she still insisted on mourning.

“So I hear you’re starting a war,” she announced. “Can I join in?”

Our family was definitely a different shade of crazy.

“You two are worse than my toddlers,” Vasili bellowed. “That’s it. Enough is enough.” He pointed a finger at Tatiana. “You will stop drinking. I don’t want to smell alcohol on you and-“

“I’ll spray more perfume,” she retorted, her speech slightly slurred.

“The fuck you will,” he roared. “You will stop drinking and taking sleeping pills. Every goddamned thing.”

Tatiana just flipped him the bird. I’d like to see my big brother try and make her do anything.

Vasili’s eyes shifted to me. It was always like this. We were the irresponsible children and he was the responsible one who had to fix everything.

Well, I knew what I was doing.

“And you, Sasha, will return the bride,” my big brother demanded.

“Nah, I’ll pass,” I told him firmly. “I’m keeping her.”

“I agree,” Tatiana chimed in. “Why should you be the only one to get what he wants and needs?”

Her voice was slurred and bitter. A bad combination.

“The two of you will be the death of me! Tatiana, you get your shit together or I’ll do it for you. And you, Sasha. You will go to Alessio and deliver his sister, then apologize.”

“The fuck I will,” I told him and blew a bubble with the gum still in my mouth. “His sister is mine.”

He pushed his hands through his hair. “Jesus Christ. I thought you had the hots for Autumn, not her friend.”

I shrugged. “Your mistake.”

“We cannot go to war with him,” Vasili attempted to reason. He must not know me well if he thought that would dissuade me from my plan. “Cassio and his gang will back him up. He’s even close with Raphael.”

“I never liked the devil anyhow,” I told him casually. “He thinks he’s more of a brother to Bella than Alexei. I bet you Alexei would be on my side.”

As if he knew we were talking about him, Alexei walked in wearing his signature black cargo pants and t-shirt. Most people shit their pants when they saw my brothers. Alexei evoked a special kind of fear. It was etched in every single piece of ink on his skin. Our parents did a good job ensuring we all turned out fucked up.

He sat himself down. “So you got yourself a bride?” His voice was casual, unemotional. It was one of his best qualities. He rarely got riled up. Unless you fucked with his wife, Aurora. Then the beast came out.

“Yeah,” I said coolly. “I need to lay low for a bit. But first I need some ink.” I grinned, the thought of tattooing Branka’s teeth marks into my skin bringing a new kind of joy. “Want to hold my hand?”

Alexei cocked an eyebrow. “I’ll keep you company. But there’ll be no hand holding.”

“I’ll hold your hand,” Tatiana slurred. “As long as you buy me a drink. I’m feeling depressed.”

“Has everyone lost their goddamned mind?” Vasili bellowed, glaring at all three of us. “Fuck your ink and holding hands.” Then he took a deep breath as if he regretted the harshness of his tone. “Tatiana, I said no more alcohol. I know you’re grieving but it won’t get better like this. Trust me.”

“Because you saw it in our parents,” I remarked sarcastically. “Don’t worry, Vasili. We all saw it and felt the repercussions, in one way or another.”

“Listen guys, I love you. I really do and there is nothing I won’t do for our family.” Vasili’s hair was about to start thinning if he didn’t stop tugging it. “But we have little ones now. We cannot start wars and feuds. Our children come first.”

Nobody said a word. I knew Alexei agreed. He’d burn the motherfucking world down if anyone even looked at little Kostya wrong. Or his wife, for that matter. Well, so would I.

And like a thunderbolt a thought struck me. My lips curved into a smug smile. I had a plan for my little kotyonok. My little wildling would finally get some relief and the result would be very beneficial.

Because nobody would want to take a pregnant woman for someone else. Shit, that was a great idea! Win-win. I’d fuck her into oblivion, put a baby in her belly, and ruin everyone’s plans. Her and me, like Bonnie and Clyde. Without the death by gunfire part, of course.

“Fuck, please stop smiling like that,” Vasili grunted. “Please stop it. I know that smile and it’s promising all kinds of fucked up things.”

I leaned back in my chair, I blew a bubble. “Don’t know what you’re talking about.”

A deep sigh left him. Jesus, my brother had turned into an old man.

“Take Branka Russo back,” Vasili threatened. “If you don’t, I will.”

I got to my feet and fixed the sleeves to my suit.

“Touch her and you won’t have to worry about a war with others, Brother,” I told him calmly. Our eyes locked, the stubbornness I felt staring back at me in his blue eyes. “Because you’ll have one with me.”

Without another word, I left his office.

THE CONSTANT BUZZING of the needle was in contrast with Alexei’s silence. True to his word, he stood by me, his arms folded and staring at me. Tatiana stayed behind with Vasili, probably getting reamed out by our big brother.

I didn’t want to voice it, but I happened to agree with Vasili on the matter of Tatiana’s drinking. She was drowning her sorrows in all the wrong ways. I didn’t want to see her end up like our mother. Tatiana was so much better than that.

Her heart was broken. Her sorrow was raw, but she was still young. She’d come through.

“So she bit you?” Alexei’s voice pulled me back.

I glanced at the artist who was inking Branka’s teeth into a permanent mark on my skin

“Moy kotyonok has claws.”

“And teeth,” he noted tonelessly, watching me with those inquisitive eyes. Alexei could always see beyond people’s barriers. It was annoying as fuck, but it was what kept him alive for all those years of captivity.

“So she’s the one?”

“Are you judging?” My gaze narrowed. “Did I question your judgment when you picked Aurora?”

He looked away from me, obviously seeing everything he needed to. But the tilt of his lips didn’t escape me. I was happy to see him smile more. Or half-smile, whatever the fuck that was.

His phone buzzed and he retrieved it.

My phone buzzed at the same time. Just in time, because the tattoo was finished.

“Want a soothing cream over it?”

Fucking pussy. “No.”

I retrieved mine just as Alexei spoke. “Alessio’s plane just landed. And he’s not alone.”

And sure as shit, the message waited for me. One from Vasili and the other from Alessio.

Alessio: You’re a dead man.

Vasili: If you’re keeping that woman, now is the time to disappear.

My big brother always came through. Always. And I’d always come through for him.

“Where are you going to go?” Alexei asked casually.

“It’s better if you don’t know,” I told him.

Not that anyone could torture any information out of my brother.

It was time I collected on my second debt from the Konstantin brothers.

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Chapter Forty-Five

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BRANKA

I jerked against the ropes, trying to twist my wrists out of them. Unsuccessfully.

Anger and fury warmed my body when Sasha left me naked. That was short lived. A cool draft touched my skin, the A/C sending goosebumps through me. I was cold, my wrists secured above my head and exhaustion heavy in my bones. Despite the discomfort, I was able to drift off to sleep for a little bit, but it was short lived.

My eyes roamed over the room. A king-size bed with an elaborate iron headboard. A beautiful black duvet that was useless because I laid on top of it instead of tucked under it. Heavy drapes, in midnight black, just like Sasha's soul, framed the window.

At the sound of the door opening, my eyes snapped to the door.

Sasha stood in the doorway, his eyes traveling over my naked body. Something dark and possessive lurked in his eyes with promises that sent shudders rolling down my spine.

"Miss me, kotyonok?" he drawled lazily.

I shook my head, unable to find my voice. The way he watched me had my heart galloping. The look in his eyes promised pleasure and the kind of sin that would burn me alive. I wanted it.

To my horror, wetness pooled between my thighs and I rubbed them together. He noticed the movement and his eyes flared. The throbbing pulsed and sent a sliver of heat through me.

"My woman needs a release," he stated in a throaty voice. My eyes lowered down his body and locked on his erection. My body responded

immediately, like he was my personal simulator. “What my kotyonok wants, she gets.”

My nerves prickled. If he brought me to the edge, only to take it away, I’d lose my shit. Anxiety danced through me and the moment Sasha tugged his shirt over his head, a violent shiver went through my body.

I lusted for him and there was no resisting it. Lust would be my downfall.

His hard abs and stomach marked with ink made my mouth water. His erection pushed against his pants. He appeared massive, his size promising to deliver pleasure but also pain. He proceeded to remove his trousers and boxers with ease and grace. His pale blue gaze never wavered from me, monitoring my every single breath and watching my every move.

“A-are you going to go all the way this time?” I hated how breathy and needy my voice sounded, but after so many days of near orgasms, I was desperate for a release.

He stepped toward me with the grace of a black panther. “It’s time to finish what we started.”

His boxers slid down his thick, muscular thighs and he kicked them off to the side. Holy fucking shit! He was huge. Suddenly, I worried whether we were compatible. There was no fucking way *that* could fit inside me.

“Sasha…”

“Yes, kotyonok?”

My eyes were glued to his groin area. “I don’t think we’re the right fit.”

A strangled laugh shook his chest. “We’re the perfect fit,” he reassured me.

He took a step forward and his palm came to rest on my ankle, then traveled higher and higher as his big body covered mine. Sasha’s knee parted my legs. The mattress dipped under his weight and the throbbing between my thighs pulsed with an ache only he could sate.

He was on top of me, his big body sheltering mine like a protective blanket.

My hands were still tied. With his one hand, he reached up and untied my wrists, then brought each one to his lips and kissed it. Then his hand trailed down my collar bone to my breasts, and his finger flicked my nipples hard.

“Your tits are gorgeous.” A shudder rolled down my body. I trailed my hands over his body, touching his shoulders, his stomach, then his forearms.

I noticed fresh ink and my heart stilled. It was where I had bitten him a few days ago. My eyes searched his. God, those light blue eyes! When they burned with that untamed fire, it was enough to melt me from the inside.

“Why?” I breathed.

“I love your fire, kotyonok. Hurt me, claw me, bite me. It shows me how much you care.”

Jesus, who was crazier here? Sasha because he was psychotic or me because I loved his crazy?

“You’re crazy.” My thighs clenched and my legs parted further for him, glistening with juices trickling down my inner thigh.

“The two of us are the right kind of crazy,” he purred, pushing his cock against my lower stomach. I’d lose my mind if I didn’t have him inside me soon. “Your pussy is my addiction. I can’t wait to bury myself deep inside it,” he growled against my mouth.

My pussy throbbed in response and I moaned. My hips arched up, rubbing against him. He pressed a kiss to my lips. Soft, at first. Then as if he lost control, he shoved me against the mattress, making the headboard hit the wall behind us. The hung paintings rattled with the force of the impact. His tongue thrust between my lips, while his hand moved between my thighs. His fingertips sought and found my clit. I moaned into his mouth as he teased my clit, grinding into my pubic bone as he fucked my mouth.

A soft, desperate cry escaped me. My blood ran hotter than ever as he shifted his fingers down, thrusting one inside me.

He rubbed my clit with the heel of his hand, his finger deep inside me and his mouth devouring me. His tongue moved in sync with his finger, thrusting in and out, and it took no time for my body to explode. The orgasm exploded through every cell of my body, leaving me reeling and a flustered mess. He pulled back. My lust-hazed eyes stared at him in bewilderment, as I watched him crouch down and hook my legs over his broad shoulders, leaving every inch of my pussy exposed for him.

“Dessert time,” he rasped. “And you better watch me devour you. So you remember who this pussy belongs to.”

His mouth lowered to where his fingers had just been and another moan vibrated through the air just as he growled in satisfaction.

His tongue swirled around my clit, sending sparks down to my toes. I cried out when he suckled it, his teeth tugging on the bud, moving down to slide his tongue into my entrance. Fuck. His groan vibrated through me and

another round of pleasure shot through me. Shuddering, I pressed a hand to my mouth to muffle my scream as my other hand fisted his hair, scared he'd stop and take this pleasure away.

"Sasha!" I shrieked when his tongue returned to my clit. As more explosions ricocheted through my system, he wiped his mouth with the back of his hand, grinning with such smug satisfaction that if I had any energy, I'd wipe it off his face. As it was, he'd drained me of my feistiness with orgasms.

"Want to know what you taste like, kotyonok?" he rasped, his breath brushing against my lips.

Oh my God! Maybe it was depravity and all those years of waiting that had me so eager for more.

His mouth pressed to mine, his tongue sliding between my parted lips. I licked inside his mouth, our tongues dancing together. Tasting myself on his tongue was so goddamn erotic that my body shuddered underneath his.

He grabbed my thighs and wrapped them around his waist. His cock lined up with my hot entrance, he pushed in one hard thrust.

"Oh, Christ!" I screamed, my fingers clawing at his back. The pain. The pleasure. It was too much. It wasn't enough.

He stilled, that pale blue gaze as dark as the deepest oceans. Then slowly, ever so slowly, his lips curved into a smile. The blinding kind that would steal my heart.

"You waited," he murmured.

I did. Although he almost lost me. Because on my wedding night, I fully intended to sleep with my husband.

"Don't look so smug," I breathed, grinding my hips against him. I winced at the sharp pain.

His nose brushed against mine and his lips skimmed over my face. "You're mine," he rasped, his muscles shuddering. He reached between us and I watched mesmerized as his fingers wiped the blood staining my inner thighs as he brought it to his lips. It should have grossed me out. Yet, I found it erotic as fuck.

"Your blood is mine," he claimed, the look of pure obsession in his eyes. "Your body is mine. Your soul is mine. You're all mine, kotyonok."

My fingernails dug into his shoulders and my legs tightened around his waist.

“If I catch you with another woman, Sasha Nikolaev, I’ll claw her eyes out. And nothing will save you from my wrath.” It was the wrong time for this conversation, him buried so deep inside me. But I wanted to get it out there and I was serious. I didn’t care what war my actions would start. “Just like you, I don’t share.”

He was still smiling. That was good. He rocked his hips, slowly at first. In and out. In and out. Each time, he sank deeper and harder. Making me feel so full. With each thrust, the pain subsided and pleasure grew.

“You take me so fucking beautifully, kotyonok,” he praised. “Look at us,” he demanded when I didn’t immediately comply. I lowered my eyes and watched his thick shaft entering me, stretching my pussy lips wide apart. “That pussy was waiting for me,” he growled. “It’s strangling my cock, greedy for more.” He thrust harder, his tempo increasing.

“Tell me,” he growled. “Tell me how much you want it.”

I watched us, my juices sliding out to make his shaft wet. His thick cock was veiny, a mixture of my blood and juices making it easier for him to pound inside me.

“I want it,” I moaned. “I want your cock. Please-”

“Such a good girl for me. Look how right we are together,” he praised as he started to thrust faster. “So goddamned right.”

Sasha’s mouth settled around my earlobe, tugging on it with his teeth. It stung, but the pain was welcomed.

As if he lost all resemblance of control, he growled in my ear, “This cunt is mine. Say it.”

“Yours,” I whimpered.

“You can kill any woman I touch,” he growled, pistoning into me. “But I’ll do the same and worse to any man you touch.”

“Oh my God,” I sobbed. “More. Please, more.”

His hips sped up, pistoning into me, jackhammering me, until I knew I’d feel him deep inside me for as long as I lived. Then, his fingers slid between our bodies, touching my clit. Just a couple gentle strokes, such a contrast to this rough fucking, and he detonated another explosion inside me. My pussy convulsed around his cock, my screams vibrated through the air and my body shuddered violently.

At the same time, he snarled his release in my ear, hissing and cursing through it as if it felt so good it was painful. His cum filled me, spurting

inside me. I was drenched with my juices and blood, and his cum smeared inside of my thighs, creating smacking noises.

His head nestled against my neck, peppering my skin with kisses. The softness of those kisses was such a contrast to his hard fucking. This was the sweetest agony and I knew I was lost.

“Mine,” he rumbled, sending shivers down my spine. “And I’ll kill them all if they try to take you.”

Sasha Nikolaev marked me - body and soul.

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Chapter Forty-Six

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SASHA

Dusk started to fall and cast shadows on Branka's body.

I watched the rise and fall of her breasts, the glow of her naked body tempting me to take her again. And again. Until she was so sore, she'd feel me for months.

Fuck, I had lost all semblance of sanity. We should be on our way to the airport. Instead, I contemplated fucking her again. If I let my dick guide me, her brother would find us and take her away from me.

Killing him would definitely alienate Branka so I'd just have to… I don't know. Maybe half-kill him. Fuck! Not killing him would be a problem. Losing her would be an even bigger problem.

Not just for me. But for everyone because I'd start killing enemies and friends for even thinking about taking her from me.

Just the thought of losing her sent a slight tremble to my hands.

My life was shaped by a psychotic and obsessive mother. The words she spoke to me right as she took her own life made me who I was today. I still remembered those brief moments right before she took her life.

Vasili found her battered body after she jumped, but nobody knew the words she spoke to me right before. Nobody knew she almost took Tatiana with her.

My gaze swept down Branka's body. She was fucking gorgeous, every man's wet dream. But it was so much more than that. I loved her strength, sassy mouth, and her rebel spirit. I'd allow her any liberties but one.

Her freedom. It was mine.

I did the right thing. I fucking waited. Seven goddamn years. But now, *I* took her virginity. She was mine and nobody could take her from me.

My phone beeped, signaling that uninvited guests were approaching. It meant I had exactly twenty minutes to get us out of here. I stepped forward, opening the dresser and digging out clothes for Branka.

I grinned, pulling out a red dress. She'd look hot in it and it would be my reminder of her virginity that I'd claimed. I grabbed the red underwire choker lingerie with matching panties and bra. My dick instantly hardened. She'd wear it until we get to our destination and then I'd fuck her holding on to the chain.

Images already swarmed my mind and my cock demanded I do it now. Fucking uninvited visitors. Nobody had the right etiquette anymore.

Sitting down on the bed, I nudged her awake.

She swatted my arm, then attempted to shift away.

"Wake up," I told her. "Time to go."

She opened her sleepy eyes, those stormy grays capturing me. Always pulling me in.

"But we just got here," she murmured.

I didn't want to reveal that her brother was on our tail. She'd attempt to fight me. Although the thought of her choosing her brother over me seared like acid in my veins and burned like ashes.

"Get dressed and I'll buy you a phone."

That got her moving. I knew Branka lived for her phone. She was a social platform queen. *My queen.*

She took clothes from me and glanced at the size. "When did you have time for shopping?"

"I've had them for years," I told her. Her head swished my way and our gazes locked. The meaning of it wasn't lost on her. I always planned on coming for her. Alexei caught me purchasing shit for her online and just shook his head.

"Stalkerish," she muttered.

She had no idea.

She returned the attention to the clothes and she grabbed the choker. "What in the hell is that?" she grumbled.

"You put that on before your pants and shirt."

"Get the fuck out," she retorted dryly. "And here I thought I put it on afterward."

I didn’t fuck the sassiness out of her, I thought amused.

“I’m not putting that on,” she announced, handing it back to me.

I pushed it back to her. “Yes, you are. And I’ll reward you later for it.”

She blinked, her cheeks turning a deep crimson. “You will?”

“Yes, I will.”

Lust turned her eyes into molten silver. That color would never be the same. When we get married, I’d ensure she wore a silver dress. Fuck white.

“You swear it?” Her voice was throaty, her lips slightly parted.

“I promise, my insatiable kotyonok.”

WE TOOK the elevator down to the underground garage where my cars were parked.

Branka looked gorgeous in her off-the-shoulder red mini dress that hugged her curves and left her long legs bare. Instead of wearing heels, she opted for white flats. She looked good in red. And that choker gave me all kinds of ideas. The kind that involved staying in the bedroom for days.

Maybe it was my imagination or some post-getting-laid bliss, but her eyes had a hue of color this morning. Like the sky with specks of gray clouds in the clear blue sky.

I held her hand just because I could and she was so soft. She didn’t try to pull her hand away and my chest warmed. I ran my thumb across her pulse on the back of her wrist and she shuddered.

Still, she left her hand in mine.

We stopped in front of the rows of keys, and I reached for the Land Rover. It’d be our fastest way out if we had to take shortcuts.

Once in the vehicle, she pulled down her visor. I watched her run her fingers through her thick mane. It was such a simple thing but it had my blood humming in approval.

“So where are we going?” she asked, pushing the visor back up.

I couldn’t get enough of her. I loved her in my space.

“It’s a surprise.”

She rolled her eyes. “Okay, then.” She crossed her legs, then glanced out the window. “When do I get my phone?”

My eyes traveled over her long legs.

“Soon.”

She flicked a hesitant gaze to me. “What is it with these short answers?”

Frustration ran through me. I had just been buried deep inside her pussy and it still wasn’t enough. I wanted her again. On her knees with my cock deep down her throat. On her hands and knees. And most of all, I wanted her tied to my bed, at my mercy.

But she’d have to trust me first.

“Sasha?”

I drew my attention back to Branka.

Each soft look by her burned a hole in my chest and tattooed her name in bold letters onto my heart.

And suddenly, I knew. There’d be no moving on from Branka Russo in this life.

Only in death.

As we boarded the plane, a frown pulled on Branka’s lips.

“What’s the matter?”

We entered the cabin and she took a seat on the white-leather couch. Her bottom lip between her teeth, she kept twisting her wrist while her fingers from the other hand wrapped around it. I took a seat next to her and took her face into my hands.

“Tell me what’s wrong.”

The gaze of rainy clouds met mine and pulled on my heart. It was in that very moment, that very fucking moment, I realized I loved this woman. It wasn’t the sweet kind of love. Or gentle. It was the burning kind that would tear down the world and everyone in it if she left me.

“I want to call my brother,” she answered, then swallowed. “And Killian.”

The icy rush of panic slithered through me. I let go of her face or risked crushing her skull.

“No.” The rainy clouds in her eyes turned to thunder.

She didn’t love me. Just like Mama didn’t love me. Like Papa didn’t love Mama.

Branka doesn’t love me.

The images of my own mother unhinged and crazy muttering to herself played in my mind. Round and round she went, until she jumped off, killing herself.

“They should know I’m okay,” she protested.

“No.”

“Eventually, I’m going to go back home,” she hissed.

I’d never let her leave. She was mine now.

Jealousy was an ugly thing. I saw it first hand with my mother. I swore I’d never get in so deep. Yet, fighting it now would be like swimming against the tide.

Round and round we go.

Branka turned her face away from me, like she couldn’t stand to look at me. My chest tightened. My heart twisted with rage that any man would ever touch her. Just the thought of it marred my vision with a red mist.

My hand wrapped around her slim neck, keeping her face on me. Always on me.

“You’re a jerk,” she breathed, anger crossing her expression. “I hate your psychotic ass.”

I applied pressure against her neck. She didn’t pull away. Instead her eyes hazed over, anger turning to molten silver. *Lust.*

Victory rushed through my veins and sent heat to my groin. I squeezed her neck tighter and her body leaned into my touch. Her lips parted and those eyes watched me half-lidded with so much need that it sent a shudder down my spine.

She might not love me, but she desired me. I’d use that and make her love me. I just needed time.

“Spread your legs and show me how much,” I said, my tone hoarse. “Have your pussy show me how much you hate me.”

Her neck bobbed, movement delicate under my touch.

“Scared, kotyonok?” I challenged with a smirk. Her eyes narrowed, but her breathing betrayed her. Her chest rose and fell, her chest turned blotchy. “Scared that you’ll realize you’re lying to yourself or to me?”

“Neither,” she muttered.

We were already up in the air, on our way to Russia. This could be a good way to kill some time. I’d fuck love into her, have her forget about everything and everyone but me.

Yes, good plan.

I tilted her face up so she'd look at me. "Prove it," I demanded. "Show me how much your pussy hates me."

A tremor rolled down her body. Her eyes shone like diamonds. The pressure in my chest increased.

"You're going to prove to me how much you hate me."

I scooped her up into my arms and started for the back of the plane where the bedroom was.

I set Branka on her feet, then waited. Waited for her to stop me. Waited for her to tell me she didn't want me.

She didn't stop me. She didn't move.

Just watched me with those eyes that had the power to bring me to my knees. I just had her hours earlier and I wanted her again. So fucking bad. This lust and need for her grabbed hold of me and twisted me beneath my skin.

It demanded I own her. That I control her.

Branka's hand came to my chest and that simple touch burned. It branded me. A reluctant rush of heat ran to my groin. I lowered my eyes to watch her hand trail down my abs. It wasn't good enough. I wanted her on my skin. I wanted my hands on her skin.

I reached for the zipper of her dress. The sound of it sent an echo through the back of the plane. The dress slid down her body and pooled around her feet, leaving her in her undergarments and that red choker.

It was the best sight. Fucking ever.

She reached out and grabbed the hem of my shirt, then pulled it over my head. Kicking off my boots, I unbuckled my belt and got rid of my pants.

Branka's eyes lowered to my chest, staring at my tattoos, then lower to my cock glistening with precum. My fucking groin throbbed, eager to get inside her. When her hazy gaze lifted to mine, a ripple of darkness slithered through me.

I grabbed her ass and hoisted her up so she could wrap her legs around my waist. I needed to get my shit together. I needed to get my fill of her. The need to tie her up and gag her, then punish her for ever entertaining marriage with Killian.

How many times did Killian kiss her? Touch her? See her smile? Irish fucking bastard.

Her back pushed up against the wall. My mouth took hers for a rough kiss. She moaned into my mouth, her thighs clenched around me.

“I want it,” she rasped.

“What do you want?” I demanded roughly. I wanted to hear her say it. “Tell me what you want, kotyonok.”

“I want your cock,” she breathed against my mouth.

Tearing her panties to shreds, I thrust my cock into her. Hard. Rough. Deep. She cried out, not expecting anything so brutal. My control snapped. My need grew.

“More,” she demanded, her drenched pussy strangling my cock. She was so fucking tight that I almost came right there and then.

I hissed through my teeth as heat curled at the base of my spine.

Frustration lit up my back. No woman had ever rattled me. This woman on the other hand had me acting like a horny teenager.

She was so wet that I slid in and out of her, ramming my hips into hers so hard that the wall rattled with the force of it. Her head arched backwards, her tits bouncing with each thrust.

Her nails dug into my shoulders, holding on to me as I pounded into her like a madman. My balls slapped against her ass. Her moans filled the space and her pussy clenched every time my cock disappeared inside her.

“Look at us, kotyonok,” I demanded roughly. “Look how perfectly my cock fits inside your tight cunt.” I paused my thrusts, still deep inside her. “Look now.”

Her half-lidded eyes lowered to our joined bodies, my shaft deep inside her. A visible shudder rolled over her.

She started grinding against me, up and down, both of our eyes glued to my dick sliding in and out of her. It was the hottest thing I’d ever seen.

“Please,” she gasped, grinding mindlessly against me. Her eyes fluttered shut, tilting back against the wall. “I need– *oh, God*.”

I yanked her hair and forced her to watch as I fucked her. In and out. Deep and hard. My orgasm lurked, ready to unleash with each thrust. Ramming into her, I could feel her clenching, fighting her own orgasm.

“Sasha, please,” she panted, her eyes rolling back in her head. “Please.”

Her hips arched, her hair sticking to her forehead. I wanted to fuck her ass, taste her on my tongue, tie her up and mark her with my teeth, flogger and my hands, then make her come. I wanted it so bad that it made my balls ache. She moaned, rocking against me.

Her fingers clawed at my shoulders and she unraveled. I thrust into her, over and over again, fucking her through her orgasm. She exploded on my

cock, and I let myself go. Feeling just her and her drenched pussy.

With one last thrust, I spilled deep inside her, remaining buried to the hilt while she trembled from the force of her orgasm. Her heartbeat thudded erratically, in rhythm with mine. Our eyes locked, then slowly lowered to see us still connected, my seed sliding down her inner thighs.

And satisfaction grew inside me. If I impregnate her, she'd stay with me. Never leave me. Branka was loyal, almost to a fault, and our baby would have all her loyalty.

I slowly lowered her down on her unsteady legs. She stood in front of me, naked and beautiful. Like a fucking goddess. My goddess.

I leaned closer to her and braced my hands on either side of her head. Her eyes came to my shoulders, studying the phoenix tattoo.

She touched the phoenix. "Vozroditsya." When she blinked, I explained. "Reborn. You're my rebirth. I've waited for you for a long time, kotyonok."

She looked at me with wide eyes.

"And this one?" she rasped, her fingers trembling as she traced them over my latest tattoo.

"That one is to remember how perfect your teeth are on my skin."

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Chapter Forty-Seven

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BRANKA

I didn't know what to make of Sasha.

My kidnapper. My lover. My savior.

As odd as that sounded.

I was confused. Emotional. Guilty. I didn't love Killian, but I respected him. I owed him more. Instead I caved to Sasha without any regard to my fiancé. Yes, I told Killian there was a man in my past, but I claimed he was history to me.

And here I was consorting with him. Getting wild with him.

After we landed, my eyes widened with shock the moment the door of the cabin opened and we stepped out onto the platform.

A *Welcome to Siberia* sign stared back at us.

"Siberia?" I said incredulously, staring at the desolate land without a city in sight. After we left Sasha's place, we drove to a small private airport where a luxury jet waited for us. Twelve hours later, voilà. Cool summer and middle of nowhere. "You brought me to fucking Siberia?"

Sasha didn't seem to notice my tone.

"You've never been," he replied. "Siberia should be on every woman's bucket list."

I rolled my eyes. "No wonder you're not married," I remarked dryly.

His gaze flashed with something sardonic. Something obsessive in his eyes unnerved me. My sixth sense warned. But my body refused to cooperate. Because the man was way too good at dishing mind blowing orgasms.

“I’ve been waiting for *you*.” A whisper of darkness laced his voice and my pulse leapt. I sucked in a breath.

Did he mean-

No, he couldn’t have. Besides, I couldn’t forget and forgive that easily. He didn’t come back for years. Not once but twice he had left me. What if Wynter was his first choice? I’d never settle for being someone’s second best while keeping him as my first choice. It was a recipe for heartbreak.

I knew it wouldn’t bode well. Not for him. Not for me. Eventually, I’d resent the fact that he didn’t… love me? Jesus, this couldn’t be. I didn’t love him.

It’s a thin line between love and hate. Of all the phrases and words, this one came to mind. Wasn’t that what people always said?

“What’s the deal with you and Wynter?” The words slipped from my mouth. Without my fucking permission. I didn’t want to sound like a pathetic, jealous woman. Yet, I sounded like one with this question, but I couldn’t retract them back.

“She needed help. She isn’t mine. You’ve always been mine.”

My mouth parted in shock and I stared at him in disbelief. *I’m his?* Did that mean–

I shook my head. No, there were no words of love. Only possession. It was too much. Not enough. Too soon. Terrifying. Thrilling.

“I’ve been waiting for you, Branka Russo, for the past four years.” He took my wrist and we both stopped walking and faced each other. He leaned closer, his face inches from mine. A raindrop landed on my lashes, but I didn’t dare move. My ears buzzed. Our breaths mixed.

“Do you know how long four years is for a man?” My heart fluttered, the wings that were long clipped slowly spreading. I licked my lips and his gaze locked on the movement. “Do you, kotyonok?”

My mouth was too dry to say anything, but I couldn’t keep my tongue back. It was one thing that I loved about Sasha Nikolaev. He let me be me. “I’d imagine they’re as long as they are for a woman.”

A sardonic breath left him and his possessive gaze watched mine. “I haven’t touched a woman since I made you promise me to wait for me.”

“You haven’t?” I breathed.

He brought a finger up to my lips, then ran it across my bottom lip. My lips parted on their own will, breathing the cool air.

“Not a single woman.” He pressed his finger against my lips. “Suck.”

Without hesitation, I drew his finger into my mouth and sucked. His eyes darkened into dark ocean pools. It was addictive watching that pale gaze burn for me.

I scraped his finger with my teeth. He didn't seem to mind the pain. "You're lucky you didn't let that fucker Killian touch you. You might have saved his life." His words ignited an inferno and were burning me from the inside. Maybe he fucked all my brains out. "But I will punish you for thinking you could ever replace me."

He pulled his finger back out, my teeth scraping against his skin. "I thought you were going to reward me," I rasped.

His gaze lowered to the choker around my neck. A growl vibrated in his chest and blue fire ignited in his eyes. The kind that consumed your soul and left only ashes behind.

"Mr. and Mrs. Nikolaev." An unfamiliar voice drew our attention and put a pause on our conversation. Probably for the best because I was flabbergasted.

Then the stranger's words sunk in. He called me Mrs. Nikolaev.

My eyes drifted to Sasha but his gaze was sharp on the stranger.

"It's nice to see you again," the man continued when Sasha and I remained quiet. "Welcome home. The car is right this way."

"Lead the way," Sasha acknowledged him.

My gaze flicked to him, raising my eyebrow. "Welcome home?" I questioned. I didn't think he lived in Russia.

As soon as the guy turned around, Sasha's big hand traveled to my lower back. My core throbbed, eager to feel him inside me again. The desire to beg him to fuck me right now was on the tip of my tongue. Maybe those years of waiting for each other backfired on both of us.

No matter. *Sasha waited for me.* I grinned happily. I'd have to reward *him.*

Apparently, my sanity had been left back in the sanctuary of St. Patrick's Cathedral.

Once in the fancy Land Rover, we both settled into our seats, and it was then I noticed Sasha had his gun holster unbuttoned.

"Do you expect trouble?" I whispered so only he could hear me as the driver sped out of the airport and down the highway.

"No. I just like to be prepared."

My eyebrows shot up. I was fairly certain he kept his gun secured for the short time we were in Louisiana.

He remained quiet for the remainder of the drive, watching the vast landscape of Siberia stretch for miles. At some point, I fell asleep while the scent of citrus remained all around me.

TWENTY-FOUR HOURS IN A RUSSIAN CASTLE.

The last thing I remembered was watching stretches of land as far as my eyes could see. I woke up as the dawn crept through the large windows in a strange room and Sasha was nowhere in sight.

Then I spent the day roaming the castle. One room in particular. The library. Lots of leather bound books stocked the shelves, the smell of old books filling the air. Tolstoy. Dostoevsky. Pushkin.

I studied the photos that hung on the wall. Portraits. Mother. Father. Kids.

But only one family photo, with the oldest son only. It. A few things Sasha let slip led me to believe his family wasn't perfect, but I still found it odd. All photos were mainly of the siblings together or by themselves. Skiing. Tubing. Family vacations without parents.

Done with snooping around, I grabbed a book and turned it over curiously. Then I grinned.

"Perfect," I muttered sarcastically. "A romance novel in Russian."

Heading for the couch, closest to the window, I grabbed the remote and sat down with my legs crossed. I flipped through the channels with a romance novel on my lap. Then I went through all the channels again. And again. Every single channel was in Russian. So was the book. The only reason I knew it was a romance novel was because the cover was steamy hot.

It made sense. When in Russia, you were supposed to watch and read Russian. Well, I sucked at Russian. The only thing I picked up so far was pierogi and I wasn't even sure that was a Russian dish.

"Let's not forget I know what *moye serdtse* means," I grumbled.

Sasha should have woken me up and dragged me along. Wherever he went. After all, he brought me all the way to Russia. Instead he left me

alone in a remote Russian castle, dying of boredom and hating being alone.

It hadn’t even been a full week and I already missed my family. Even Killian. I wanted to call him and explain. I wanted to talk to my brother. Instead, I was still here. Without a phone. Without entertainment. And without any company.

Pressing a few more buttons, I switched over to HBO Max.

“Thank fuck,” I muttered. I was fairly certain that channel mainly had shows in English and Spanish. I started to scroll through the options and paused over *House of Dragons*. I hadn’t started watching it but with nothing better to do now, it sounded like a good plan.

“Binge watching it is,” I said to nobody in particular.

Sasha could have taken me with him, wherever he was going. Maybe he thought I’d take off. I wouldn’t, but that's neither here nor there. So here I was, sitting on the couch in the luxurious library of our castle.

Not our castle, I quickly corrected myself.

Either way, it left me spending the entire day alone. I pulled the blanket over me and pressed the play button.

I watched the episodes back-to-back for hours, holding my breath, imagining dragons and handsome princes with hair whiter than Sasha’s breaking hearts only to swoop in later to rescue the heroine all over again.

Despite my shitty life and parents, I still believed in happily-ever-after. Autumn’s parents breathed that hope into me. People joked about my matchmaking, but there was just something magical about seeing a couple commit to each other. Finding that love that consumes you.

Like Autumn and my brother.

It was a long and hard road for the two of them, but they finally got their happy ending.

Sitting alone, I swooned over Prince Daemon Targaryen, a morally ambiguous and reprehensible character and hoped for his redemption. The impulsive and unpredictable rogue had me panting and rooting for him. Maybe because I saw someone else in him or maybe because I thought not all morally gray men were bad.

Just look at my brother and his friends. Even Sasha.

God, I wished Autumn was here so I could talk to her. I hated being alone. It was one of my weaknesses. Ever since I watched my older sister and Alessio sneak away in the shadows of the night, abandoning me to

Father's cruelty, I was terrified of being left behind. Mother left me long before she died. Sasha left me once. Would he do it again?

Would I be left to linger in the shadows again?

Left to linger in the shadows, being invisible and having nobody to love me.

A song came on and I reached for the remote before pausing the screen to read the title of the song.

“That song is too depressing.” Fingers ran through my hair and my head whipped around to find Sasha standing behind the couch. “Only happy songs for my kotyonok.”

I shook my head. We hadn’t talked about music preferences but if he thought I only listened to happy songs, he was sadly mistaken.

“When did you get back?” I asked him, throwing off the blanket and Prince Daemon on the screen completely forgotten.

“Just now.”

“I didn’t hear you come in.”

He came around and sat down next to me, the couch slightly dipping under his weight. My body shifted, falling into him and he wrapped his arms around me, then propped up his legs.

“What kind of show is that?”

“*House of Dragons*.”

He cocked his eyebrow. “You know dragons don’t exist, right?”

“Get the fuck out,” I muttered. “And here I had a dragon on my Christmas list.”

He glanced at me, amusement ghosting across his Arctic-colored eyes. He kissed me soft and slow, running his fingers through my hair.

“In that case, you shall get a dragon,” he murmured against my hair.

I rolled my eyes, but couldn’t keep my lips from smiling.

It was me and him, and in this very moment, nothing else mattered.

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Chapter Forty-Eight

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BRANKA

I must have fallen asleep because I woke up to rough lips on my throat, nibbling, licking, biting, and hands all over my body. And I was in bed.

For a fraction of a moment, I panicked but then the familiar citrusy scent registered through my hazy brain. Rough fingertips marked my skin, and it wasn't until his fingers reached for my nipple through the material of my bra.

My lips parted from the sensation.

"That's right, kotyonok," he murmured, his breath hot in my ear. "It's time for your punishment."

"I haven't been bad," I protested weakly.

His chest rumbled. "You almost married another man."

"That's in the past," I murmured weakly while his mouth traveled over my skin.

Through the lust in my brain, I realized all my clothes were gone with the exception of that ridiculous choker connected to my bra and panties via a chain. He cupped my cheek and assaulted my mouth with an all-consuming kiss. He tasted, owned, possessed.

The sensation of his fingers on my nipple overwhelmed me and I moaned into his mouth.

"Beg me to punish you, kotyonok."

I had no fucking idea what he meant by it. His tongue thrust back inside my mouth while his hands moved to the chain and yanked on it.

“Ouch.” A soft cry escaped me in surprise, my eyes snapping wide open.

A dark chuckle vibrated between us. “Beg me to punish you.”

I eyed him warily. I didn’t like pain.

As if he could read my thoughts, he thrust two fingers inside me. To my horror, I was soaking wet. “Beg me to punish you, kotyonok, and you’ll be rewarded.”

This made no damn sense, but my body didn’t seem to mind the insinuation. His gaze touched my skin. His body came down on mine and I slid my arms around him, his muscles warm and hard. He always radiated heat. Maybe it had something to do with being Russian. Or maybe it was just him.

I loved how big he was. I loved how he made me feel protected. Despite the rough start of our quote unquote relationship. I loved everything about him.

He pinched my nipple again and I gasped, then bit my lower lip. “Beg me,” he ordered while bliss hummed beneath my skin.

Lifting my head, I met his gaze as he ran a rough palm across my cheek and then cupped the nape of my neck. He kissed me while I ran my hands over the smooth of his back. Every kiss with him felt new. Hot. Wet. Obsessive.

“I want your everything,” he rasped and his voice wrapped around my heart. My heartbeats slowed and the raw feelings cut through my chest. It was a good kind of pain. *I think.*

His chest rose and fell with every breath. He was holding back. For my account, but he wanted this. Needed this. So I’d give it to him. This wasn’t just about him though. It was about me too. My pain recognized his. He had tragedy in his life, just as I had. They were different, but it didn’t mean that they hurt any less.

“Please punish me.” The words slipped through my lips without my permission.

A deep, rumbling growl echoed in our bedroom and his eyelids filled with lust.

I wanted to please him. I wanted to be his everything.

Just like he was quickly becoming my everything.

Taking his hand in mine, his ink stark against my pale skin, I placed it at the base of my throat. He could easily squeeze the life out of me, but I

trusted him not to. He stared at me with a feral look in his eyes. I was naked with the exception of the choker Sasha seemed to love so much and laid out before him for his taking. His gaze roamed over me, pausing over my bare sex and wild obsession entered his eyes.

All for me.

“Look at that pretty little cunt,” he growled as his fingers came down between my thighs and glided through the arousal. “So fucking wet. Clenching for my fingers.” He bit my lip gently. “Or is it my cock you want, kotyonok?”

A shudder rolled through me. “Everything,” I whimpered, rolling my hips against his hand.

He flipped me over in one swift move. His hands came to my hips and he pulled them up, so that my ass was up in the air. He ran his hands over my ass, molding the soft flesh to fit his palms. Then he slapped it without warning and a gasp left my lips and my hips arched.

I waited for another slap but it never came. Instead I felt his teeth on my bare ass cheek. First left, then right. I moaned and rocked back against him. But when he licked me from my pussy to my ass, I thought it was game over. A violent shudder rolled through me, threatening to release the dam and send an orgasm through me.

“You look so good on your hands and knees, kotyonok,” he rasped. I thought his voice shook and I turned to watch him. He wrapped those inked fingers around his shaft and stroked it once, then twice. “You taste even better. So fucking good that it makes my balls ache.”

God, why did I find the sight of him jacking off so goddamn erotic?

“Do it again,” I breathed.

His eyes flared and he slapped my ass again hard. “I issue the demands.”

He pushed two fingers inside me, and I sighed as my pussy clenched down on him.

“Your greedy cunt wants this,” he groaned. “It wants to be punished so *I* can give you pleasure. Nobody but me can give you this.”

Another slap.

“*Oh, God*.”

I pushed against his fingers, urging him to finger fuck me. Tongue fuck me. Anything, as long as he fucked me.

“You’re breaking all my rules,” he said coarsely as he pulled his fingers out. I made a noise of frustration. “I’m supposed to be in control. I’m not. I’m supposed to keep you still. You aren’t.” *Slap.* “Eyes forward, kotyonok.”

I must have not obeyed fast enough. *Another slap.* My ass cheeks burned.

“Ow,” I protested half-heartedly and turned back to stare at the headboard.

“You like it.” He was right. The heat spread from my ass all the way to my pussy.

I could feel the head of his cock against my hot entrance and a tremble coasted through me. My fingers curled into the sheets, gripping them. I fought the urge to move against his hard cock, blood running through my veins lit with the need only he could sate.

He eased inside me, his head only and a moan shattered the air. My insides clenched him hard, urging him on.

“You’re so goddamn wet,” I rasped. “You’re taking me so well. This cunt was made for my cock.” I groaned as he slapped my ass again. Right after, he ran his hands over the curve of my ass and squeezed. “Your pussy is gripping me like a tight fist. It was made for fucking, but just for me.”

I couldn’t control my body. I rocked back against him and he pulled out only to push all the way back in. His thrust was powerful and deep. I groaned and dropped to my elbows. I moaned into the pillow as he fucked me harder. Pressure built at the base of my spine and burned through my veins like wildfires. I was so fucking close. His deep, penetrating thrusts sent me to a place where nothing existed but this pleasure.

His hand wrapped around my waist and pulled me up so his chest was at my back while his other wrapped around my throat.

His mouth skimmed against my ear.

“I’ll punish you next time.” His voice was hoarse, and I didn’t think he realized he said those words out loud. “You smell so fucking good.”

He nipped my earlobe, then bit down on my neck and sucked, surely leaving a mark on my skin. He thrust. In and out. Hard and deep. Fast and rough.

I panted, the haze in my brain thickening. My head fell back to rest against his shoulder, my heart pounding against his tattooed arm. His heart thundered against my back just as wildly as mine.

My head lolled on his shoulder, like I was a rag doll.

“Such beautiful tits,” he praised. “I’ll fuck them next. I’ll be all your firsts and your lasts.”

He nipped my shoulders and his hand slid between my legs. And all the while he thrust inside me. Slick wetness. Flesh against flesh. My orgasm exploded through me. Fireworks lit behind my eyelids. I shuddered and clenched around his cock and all the while he fucked me through my orgasm.

He pushed me to my hands and knees, all the while fucking me and holding my hips up.

“Who does this belong to?” he demanded to know, squeezing my ass cheek. He slapped my ass as if he was mad that it took me an extra second to answer. The truth was my brain was fried.

He pulled out completely and then slammed back inside me, hitting my G-spot. A moan rose up my throat and I rocked against him, hungry for another orgasm. He pushed back inside in one hard thrust. My eyes closed and I saw stars.

“Who?” he growled.

“You,” I breathed, his cock deep inside me. My hand came around and rested on his hard ass, my fingernails digging into him. If he wanted to mark me, I’d mark him too.

“Who’s fucking you?” He fisted my hair, pushing in and out of me. Hitting my G-spot every fucking time. “Who’s fucking you, kotyonok?”

“You”

I shattered again as he came inside me. This was the closest I felt to another human being and I feared losing it.

Both of us panted, struggling for air. My muscles shook. So did his, as his arms held me, murmuring soft Russian words I couldn’t understand.

I shifted my face to meet his gaze, questions in my eyes.

“You chase my ghosts away, kotyonok. I’m going to kill yours.”

It was such a Sasha Nikolaev statement. The most romantic thing I had heard.

Except, I didn’t realize he meant it literally.

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Chapter Forty-Nine

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SASHA

Bliss.

Every day with her was a bliss. I'd lost count of how many times I'd taken her. Each time it was different. Better than the last time. But much to my surprise, kissing her was my favorite. She'd melt against me, her slim fingers wrapping around my bicep or nape. Depending on the position.

Bottom line, I was insatiable when it came to Branka Russo. I wanted to make her Mrs. Nikolaev. Except, I didn't think she was ready.

Every single corner of my Russian family home was slowly being replaced by Branka. The hallways where old ghosts lurked became brighter. Branka's shadow replaced them. The balcony from which my mother took her own life no longer reminded me of that fateful day. Now it reminded me of Branka's moans. The night before I bent her over the rail and pounded into her like my life depended on it.

Maybe it did. Maybe she was my cure all along.

As I owned every inch of her body and whispered of our future together, I still wanted more. I wanted her words of love. Those remained locked tightly behind her beautiful lips.

We had time though. I'd earn it. As long as she was with me.

We were back in our bedroom. We spent a lot of time in our bedroom. It was my favorite room for sure. Branka's too. She admitted to it, although it might have had something to do with the fact that I couldn't keep my hands to myself.

But I also wanted her to admit the feelings she had. Maybe it wasn’t love for her - yet - but she felt something. I wanted to own it. I needed to heal every ounce of her old pain. From now on, the only pain she’d ever have was the one connected to pleasure and thorough fucking.

I studied the hickey on her breast with pride. Like a fucking teenager.

“Did you live here when you were a kid?” Her hair was in my face, over my chest and her cheek pressed against my heart.

“On and off,” I told her. “Before my mother died, we stayed here. Afterwards, we stayed in New Orleans and came here only when Father demanded it.”

“Were you close with them?”

“Tatiana, Vasili, and I were close.” Vasili was our father, mother, and brother. “Alexei too once we found out about him.”

“Huh?”

“He’s our half-brother,” I clarified while her slim fingers roamed my chest. “He has a different mother.”

I never talked about our family. Fucking ever. With Branka, I kept finding myself saying little things here and there. I couldn’t decide whether it was good or bad. But I knew one thing for sure. It didn’t make me bitter like before.

“Your mother?” I questioned her. “Were you close with her?”

Her shoulders stiffened and I thought she wouldn’t answer.

“No, not really,” she whispered, her face still buried in my chest. “Father had beaten down her spirit way before I was born. There wasn't much of her left.”

The cruelty of her father was known by many. He was in alliance with Benito King for a reason. They were both cut from the same cloth.

“Did he beat down your spirit?” I asked softly.

I knew the answer, but I wanted her to say it. I wanted her to know how fucking strong she was and be proud of it.

She lifted her head, meeting my gaze.

“It was what he hated the most about Alessio and me,” she murmured. “No matter how many days he’d have us beaten or tortured, we’d still fight back. No matter how many days he left us in the dark basement, we’d still hang on to the glimmer of hope. He couldn’t control us or break us the way he had mother. Mia was on her way to becoming like Mom.” I could feel her neck bobbing as she swallowed hard. Fuck, if I could go back to

twenty-five years ago, I'd kill her father the moment she was born. If only I knew. "It was the reason Alessio took her away. He never said it out loud, but he could see her slowly dying in front of his eyes."

My hand traveled up and down her smooth back. "He should have taken you. He shouldn't have left you behind."

She stilled, but she didn't confirm it nor deny it.

"I gave Father a run for his money though," she said, her tone cold. "He might have convinced me that Alessio would never come back for me, but he knew the day I submitted to him, I'd be a corpse."

One thing was certain. Branka would never cower in front of anyone. No matter what.

Our gazes held. Unspoken words lingered. The old ghosts lost their power over us. Only the two of us mattered.

I watched the rise and fall of her breasts, tempting me. She looked fucking gorgeous, her curves tempting me.

Her fingers came up to my biceps, drifting featherlike down and down until they came to my hand, skimming over my fingers.

"What do these tattoos mean?"

She traced them lightly, one finger to another. "Different things."

She flicked her eyes up and then back, focusing on the phoenix. She re-traced it, her touch feather light.

"A phoenix," she murmured softly. She moved to the next one. "What's this one?"

"It's the hamsa." Her brows furrowed, so I explained. "The hand-shaped symbol represents protection and healing."

"Are the phoenix and the hamsa connected? Rise and healing?" It didn't surprise me that she connected the dots. I nodded my answer. "You want to rise with each new death and heal."

She understood the meaning. We might have been apart for all those years but something kept us connected. On a fundamental level, we were very much alike. We both went through life, hiding ourselves behind a mask while deep down, we slowly healed ourselves.

In our own way.

"Have you healed?" I asked her.

She took a sharp breath, then slowly exhaled. "Sometimes I think so. Other times, I still feel like that little girl stuck in a dark basement."

I nodded in understanding.

“You’re strong,” I told her. “Much stronger than anyone gives you credit for.”

Her lips curved into a soft smile. Different from all others.

“I think you’re the only one who thinks so.”

“They're idiots for not seeing it,” I told her. “You might not have scars and ink, but you’re just as badass.”

She chuckled lightly, her fingers skimming down my forearms, until her fingers intertwined with mine.

“I had them, you know.” When I cocked an eyebrow, she explained. “Scars. Some were really bad.”

I saw them. That photo of the little girl with her knees pressed to her chest and scars over her body was tattooed in my mind. It was my justification every time I killed an abusive fucker who dared to do something like that to another human being.

“My sister had a lot of scars too,” she continued in a soft voice. I hadn’t seen the full extent of Mia’s scars but the ones I saw were really bad. It sent red rage burning through my veins. “I begged Alessio for plastic surgery. I didn’t want to live the rest of my life hiding behind layers of clothes. There was too much I hid already.” A shuddering breath left her, and her fingers squeezed mine. She didn’t even realize she was doing it. “Alessio agreed to pay for plastic surgery only if I agreed to talk to a therapist.”

Silence followed. Not an uncomfortable one, but full of past ghosts.

“Mia talked about you all the time,” I told her. Her eyes flickered to me, the dark storms passing through them.

“You knew her?” I nodded. I could practically see wheels spinning in her head, connecting the dots. “Both of you served in the military. With Jason.”

I nodded again.

“She loved you,” I said. “Maybe even more than your brother.”

Branka’s neck bobbed as she swallowed. “I was happy she got away. But also mad I got left behind.”

I could understand the feeling. I wasn’t left behind physically but I was never good enough for our mother.

“That’s all she talked about. Coming back for you.” Mia’s connection to her sister and brother was unlike anything I had ever seen. I was close with my siblings, but Mia depended on them. Mentally.

“You killed the men who hurt her?”

“Yes.”

A heartbeat passed. “Good.”

Silence danced in the shadows. Hers. Mine. Ours. But I knew together we’d beat them all. Fuck, if I had to give up hard core sex, I would. For her I would. My control was going to shit around her anyhow. Maybe it was her I needed all along to break my chains and the need for control.

I laughed at the irony of it all. She made me come harder than ever before and I barely even spanked her. Control was pretty much non-existent when I touched her. Decades of BDSM and it took a virgin to send it all to hell.

“Sasha?” Her voice was hesitant. She avoided looking at me, staring at our bodies tangled between the sheets. Hers flawless and mine a carpet of tattoos.

“Hmmm.”

She bit her plump, pink lip.

“I don’t know if I can give you what you need.” My heartbeat paused, watching her. If she asked me to let her go, I didn’t think I could. I wasn’t that strong. “But I want to try. If you want to do–” Her voice trailed off.

I placed two fingers underneath her chin, forcing her to look at me. “Try what?”

“Your kind of sex,” she murmured.

My chest tightened. I knew how hard it was for her to give someone control of her body. The fact that she wanted to give it a try meant that maybe, just maybe, she’d learn to love me.

And me, I was so deep into her that even the word ‘love’ faded in comparison.

Her delicate throat worked up and down with a swallow.

“Just promise me you won’t look at me differently if I lose my shit.”

There was only one way I could even look at her. With the maddest, deepest obsession.

“Kotyonok, you don’t have to-“

“I want to.” The stubborn tilt to her chin confirmed her determination. Branka *wanted* to live, not just exist.

I cupped her cheek and pressed a kiss on the tip of her nose.

“I promise,” I vowed. I’d cut off my balls and my dick before I’d hurt her.

She nodded and her hands wrapped around my neck. Her nails lightly scraped against it. I could see her pulse thundering beneath the soft flesh of her neck. I slid my hand to the back of her head and fisted her hair, pulling her head back to look at me.

“Do you trust me?”

Bu-boom. Bu-boom. Bu-boom.

Three heartbeats was too long of an answer. I’d have to work harder.

“I trust you to stop,” she breathed. “And not hurt me.”

I tugged her hair to bring her closer to me, our lips almost touching.

“I’ll cut my dick off before I hurt you, kotyonok.”

She briefly closed her eyes and when my mouth pressed on hers, a shudder rolled down her body. “That sounds painful,” she said half-teasingly. “And a waste of a really good dick.”

A smile grazed my lips. At least she loved my dick.

“*Moye serdtse*,” I said. Her eyebrow rose. “At any time you want me to stop, you say *moye serdtse*.”

Her lips curled up.

“You want me to call you my heart right as we’re about to get freaky in the bedroom.”

My chest rumbled with laughter. “Freaky, huh?”

Her gray eyes pierced mine as she stopped touching me and she shifted slightly. She lowered her hands and her fingers curled at the hem of her dress and she slowly pulled it over her head. Tossing it onto the floor, she stood in nothing but her red bra and thong.

A rush of blood ran to my groin. Her gaze came to mine, the vulnerability in them gutting me from the inside. She was so beautiful, it fucking hurt to look at her. I wanted her to see herself the way I saw her. Perfect.

Every. Goddamn. Inch. She was just perfect.

I studied every inch of her and all I saw was perfection. Her nipples pushed against the thin material of her bra and her panties split into two thin lines, inviting me to devour her. My eyes flickered to her face and the deep need in them had the power to fucking destroy me.

My dick throbbed and tension tightened in my body. This obsession with her ran deep. It was part of each breath and instead of easing with each day, it fucking grew and grew.

My hand gripped her hair and I tugged it backwards, then skimmed my lips against her ear.

“What’s the safe word?” I asked, my voice rough.

“Moye serdtse.”

Wrapping an arm around her waist, I pulled her against me. “If it’s too much, tell me and I’ll stop.”

“I want you to enjoy it.” Insecurity touched her voice and stabbed my heart.

She felt so fucking good, her soft body against my hard one. She smelled even better. “Trust me, I’d enjoy and like anything. As long as it’s with you.”

Her body molded into mine, grinding against me with a soft moan filling the room.

“Kneel.” She immediately obeyed, her knees touching the plush rug. “Suck my cock.”

Uncertainty crossed her expression and I took her chin between my fingers. “What is it?”

She frowned, then immediately squared her shoulders and her gaze lifted to mine.

“I’ve never done it.” God, her eyes shimmered like stars. Her hands reached for my belt and worked my belt buckle. Normally, she wouldn’t be allowed to touch me until I gave her permission. But then nothing about her was normal. She was an exception to all my rules.

“Show me what you like,” she demanded uneasily.

God, I was already hard and she hadn’t even touched my cock.

“Da.” *Yes.* My voice was a hoarse groan.

She pulled my boxers down and wrapped a hand around my hard dick, stroking gently. My cock twitched, needing more. I wrapped my hand around hers, and showed her how I liked it. Her mouth parted, her breathing hitched and a blush stained her cheeks.

I tugged on the skin hard, up and down, pre-cum already glistening on the tip of my shaft.

She licked her lips, then glanced up at me. “Y-you are so beautiful.”

If I died right now, I’d die happy. With her eyes watching me like I was her whole world. My heart pounded hard, the adrenaline rushing through my veins. This was better than the chase, more satisfying than killing the scum on this earth.

She slid her tongue up my shaft and it set my skin on fire. Heat spread across my skin, up my stomach and tightened my abs. Fuck, at this rate I wouldn't last long.

I clenched my teeth, a groan vibrating in my chest. Her eyes lifted up, her tongue licking my dick like a lollipop.

"You're doing good, kotyonok," I rasped. Too fucking good.

My hand came to her hair, my fingers gripping her mane. "I need to take control. Will you let me?"

She blinked her eyes and I wasted no time. "Deep-throat me, kotyonok," I demanded as I pushed deep inside her mouth. I pushed her hair back from her face so I could watch my cock disappear in that beautiful mouth. "Tap my thigh when you need to breathe."

She took me deeper, holding eye contact with me and obeyed. I'd never guessed she'd never done this before. It was so fucking good. Or maybe it was just her. It was so good because she was mine and I was hers.

I glided her head back so I could push my cock deeper into her throat. In and out. In and out. She made little humming noises around my cock, the vibration sending shudders through my body.

My little kotyonok enjoyed this as much as me. She pressed her thighs, rubbing them together.

What little restraint I held back, it snapped. I pushed deeper into her throat.

"All of it, kotyonok," I ordered harshly.

She gagged but didn't tap my thigh. She took me deeper, sucking me off, refusing to stop. The heat built at the base of my spine, growing hotter and unstable.

"Relax," I rasped. "You're doing so good, love. So fucking good."

Another hum. She relaxed her throat and she took me deeper in her mouth, taking every fucking inch of me.

"Fuck, kotyonok," I growled, my voice a deep rasp. "That's it."

Her head bobbed. Her eyes watered, but she refused to stop sucking. My heart thundered with the force of lightning breaking the sky. I held her hair back from her face so I could watch her expression.

She pushed her one hand between her thighs and her moan vibrated through my cock as she continued licking my shaft. Sucking and then taking it back in all the way.

“Do. Not. Touch. Yourself.” My voice was harsh. My control was gone. “That pussy is mine. Only my hand will make you come.”

She obeyed and looked up at me, her eyes shimmering and watching me with so many fucking feelings, I could easily convince myself she loved me. I pulled back slightly, and her little protest had me thrusting back deep into her throat.

The vibrations from her moans traveled all the way up my spine, the sounds of the gurgles coming from her throat so fucking erotic. I expected her to tap out. She didn’t. Instead her nails dug into my thighs, holding on. I came the hardest I ever had. The orgasm burned through my spine, wild and hot, and I came deep in her throat.

She swallowed, her cheeks stained with a blush and little tear streaks.

“Every drop,” I ordered, not that she was wasting anything. Her gaze remained locked to mine, her tongue darting out to lick my cum from the corner of her mouth. Then she wiped her mouth with the back of hand, her hair a wild mess and falling down to her waist.

Jesus fucking Christ.

She looked like a fallen virgin. A totally ruined virgin that didn’t seem to mind sinning with Satan's spawn.

“I liked it,” she murmured, her eyes soft.

I grabbed the back of her neck and pulled her up onto her feet and slammed my lips to hers, kissing her deeply and sliding my tongue into her mouth.

I was ready for another round, my dick hardening. She sighed into my mouth like I had just given her pleasure when it was her that had given me *the* blowjob of my life.

“Get on the bed,” I ordered, my voice thick with gravel. “On your hands and knees.”

She barely hit the mattress and I already stripped off the rest of my clothes.

I came up behind her.

“Ass up.” I slapped her ass to punctuate the order.

She followed the order while I kept my eyes on her, watching for signs of panic. She knelt, her eyes on me but no fear reflected in them.

“Hands and knees down, kotyonok. Get comfortable.”

She hesitated for a flicker of a moment. My hand landed on her round ass and she quickly obeyed.

I grinned, then rubbed her ass. “That’s my good kotyonok,” I praised, her ass pushing into my palm. I spread her thighs with my hands and found her so fucking wet, her juices glistening between her thighs.

Inhaling deeply, I savored her delicious scent lingering in the air. It drove me crazy.

“You’re so wet,” I said in a hoarse voice as I pushed my finger inside her thick, wet folds. “Is that from sucking me off?” Her moan was my answer.

“Don’t move unless I tell you,” I rasped.

The real punishment is my keeping her here.

“Okay,” she murmured.

Her obedience pleased me and by the flush of her skin, this was pleasurable for both of us.

She looked over her shoulder, her gray eyes clouded with lust.

“You please me so much, kotyonok,” I praised as I stroked her round ass. She pushed back into my touch again. Just like a kitten. Normally, it wouldn’t be something I allowed but with her, it fucking pleased me so much. To know she wanted my touch.

“Relax, kotyonok. I know what you need.”

I strode over to the back wall and picked up a leather flogger, then came back to Branka, still on her hands and knees waiting for me. Her ass in full view. Her juices inviting me. She was so fucking perfect.

I trailed the soft tendrils across her skin.

“What’s the safe word?” I asked her again. I wanted to make sure she remembered it.

“Moye serdtse.”

“Good. Now eyes forward.”

She turned her head around. I took my place behind her, tracing the flogger over her ass over my handprint marring her skin. I swirled it so just the tips grazed her skin.

A surprised moan slipped through her lips. My lips tugged up, then I brought the strands of the flogger closer to her skin. Her ass clenched, a soft hum vibrating from her.

I lifted the flogger up, then brought it down, whipping her on her ass once. She drew in a sharp breath, then looked over her shoulder.

“You like that, kotyonok?”

Her ass clenched, her thighs rubbing together and a pool of wetness trickled down her thighs. Her body loved this but I needed her mind to love it too.

Her tongue darted, swiping across her lips. “I think so.”

I let out a relieved breath. Then with a satisfied smile, I drew my arm back and whipped her again. A pink mark bloomed where I struck her. So fucking gorgeous.

“Such a good kotyonok,” I murmured, praising her.

Gently, I skimmed the flogger over her ass. Her scent filled the air, intoxicating me. Moaning, her body shifted forward, sinking to her elbows. Her body craved more of it. Her arousal demanded more. But it wasn’t that which had me getting hard again so fast. It was her trust.

This time, I smacked a little harder, and she flinched, squeezing her ass cheeks. Then I trailed the flogger up her thighs and over her graceful back. Her skin glowed under the moon that peered through the windows.

I traced the leather flogger back down and stopped at the dark hole of her ass. Her fingers curled into the mattress.

“I’m going to own your ass one day.” Her response was her dark hole clenching and a soft whimper. My heart pounded with force, the need to claim her buzzing through my veins. I trailed the tassels lightly over her reddened skin between her ass cheeks, then to her pussy.

I flicked her pussy lightly. She squirmed. I flicked again. Then I dropped the flogger and rubbed her entrance with my fingers.

She was so fucking wet. Swollen and glistening.

I needed to be inside her. I needed to fuck her until the entire room was spinning for both of us. I poised my cock against her warm, clenching pussy. Thrusting inside her hard, her body fell forward. My hands came to her hips, pulling her back up.

Being inside her hot, wet pussy was my heaven. Her insides clenched around my cock, her dark hair falling down her beautiful back. Holding her hips with one hand, I gripped her auburn hair, wrapping it around my fist twice.

Pulling her head back, I forced her face to mine and I took her mouth. Her back against my chest.

I slammed into her hard, over and over again.

“My kotyonok needs this,” I growled. “You need me to own you.”

“Yes,” she moaned, her body swaying forward. Her hips bucked and I tightened my grip, speeding up my tempo, fucking her like a madman. Up until now, fucking was for her. This was for us.

I slammed into her harder and harder, closing my eyes to savor how good she felt. Her pussy strangled my cock. Her moans and whimpers filled the room. I gripped her throat, thrusting in and out of her, hard. Violent. Consuming.

I fucked her hard, all resemblance of control out the window. Flesh slapping against flesh.

“Blyad,” I growled. “I’m coming, kotyonok.”

Her pussy exploded around my cock. Branka twisted her head to look at me, her face flushed and her pleasure-glazed eyes watching me. Something in her gaze had my heart glowing. Her sighs urged me to go faster and harder. Deeper.

My balls slapped against her ass cheeks. I reached around and rubbed her drenched clit. She screamed her orgasm at the same time I roared my pleasure with her name on my tongue. And the whole time, her insides clenched.

Hot lightning struck the base of my spine and the powerful orgasm ripped through me with the force of a 10.0 earthquake.

Our breathing was heavy, our bodies slick with sweat, I could feel the thundering of her heart. My cum dripped out of her cunt. I had never seen a better sight.

My hands stroked her body, roaming her soft skin. I held her close to me, my mouth skimming the soft skin of her neck, then her shoulder. Shudders rolled down her spine.

“My beautiful kotyonok,” I murmured against her skin.

Once our breathing eased, I pulled out of her and goddamn it, I already missed her pussy. I turned her over and laid her on her back.

“Stay here,” I ordered her, then disappeared into the bathroom. I grabbed a clean washcloth, soaked it in lukewarm water, then returned to her.

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Chapter Fifty

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BRANKA

Our breathing slowly evened out but our hearts beat hard in perfect harmony.

Either that or I'd become poetic from the explosive orgasms this man was giving me. Yeah, physical connection wasn't everything but… Oh. My. Gosh. It was definitely something here.

I curled up into Sasha, soaking up his warmth. Yes, I grew up in Montréal, but it didn't mean I loved the cold. The beach and sun were always more preferable.

I listened to Sasha breathe while my fingers roamed his body, tracing the ink. He had so much of it. I loved it. It was a story, his life, laid out on his skin. I wanted to know all of it. He gave me a glimpse of who he was earlier, but I wanted to know everything. It was easy to demand all of him, but it was so goddamn hard to give him all of me.

My fingers came across the bite mark and fresh ink and I paused. Did he–

I traced it, feeling my throat squeeze. He tattooed my bite mark onto his skin. I hadn't noticed it until now

"Why do you have so much ink?" I asked, almost holding my breath.

"To remember."

I lifted my head to see his expression. "Remember what?"

No answer. My palms resumed roaming his chest. I couldn't stop touching him.

"How old were you when you got your first tattoo?" His body tensed under my palms.

“Young.”

My eyebrows shot up. “How young.”

“Eleven or so.”

I knew there was a story behind his ink. My eyes roamed over his tattoos. It was like watching a story laid out in images. Endless Knot. The Christian Cross. Mythological creatures. Words in Cyrillic.

Maybe it was silly but I wanted to know more. What drove him. What made him. I wanted to understand him. For all Sasha’s directness, I didn’t know much about him. He was psychotic, dangerous, deadly. But that wasn’t all. There were layers I needed to peel to get the real Sasha.

“Which tattoo was your first one?” I asked, touching every inch of his skin.

He pointed to his ribs. A tattoo of Nemesis stared back at me. Mythology wasn’t my strong suit but I seemed to recall it was a goddess of indignation and retribution.

“Nemesis?” I asked just to be sure.

“Da.” His voice was rough, a hint of emotion thick in it.

“Why that particular one?”

Invisible walls rose all around him. I was practically on top of him but he might as well be thousands of miles away.

But he answered. “She reminded me of my mother.”

“Why?”

“Nemesis could bring about losses and suffering,” he said, his voice colder than the winter temperatures in Siberia.

“Why did you pick that tattoo?”

“Because my mother brought nothing but pain and suffering,” he remarked, his tone dry and his words rougher. It was the first time I heard a hint of his Russian accent.

I stilled, goosebumps rose on my arms. The temperature in the room took a dive. His mother must have hurt him for his expression to darken. Maybe God worked in mysterious ways after all. Connected us with our other half that mirrored our own scars. So we could help each other heal.

“Did she hurt you?” I choked out.

He shook his head. “Not like that. She just ensured we all suffered because of her rage at our father’s infidelity. She couldn’t let go so she made sure we suffered right along with her.”

There was more to Sasha than his psychotic behavior. There was a side of him that he kept tightly reined in. I wanted to know that side of him. I wanted to know all of *him*.

Before I could say anything else, he ripped the covers off me and tossed me onto my back. His body came down on mine and I slid my arms around him, soaking up his warmth. He was so big, his body a heavy blanket on my body.

His lips brushed mine as my palms roamed over the smooth muscles of his back. One day, I'd explore every single tattoo on his body and learn what they meant.

He kissed me, slow and deep, different from the rough way he fucked me earlier. My thighs parted, welcoming him back inside me.

This time his thrusts were deep and slow, like he wanted to savor the moment for as long as he could.

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Chapter Fifty-One

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SASHA

I rubbed my face, watching Branka sleep in my arms. Naked and exhausted.

My throat tightened with the memory of the words my mother last spoke to me.

You'll never be good enough. Not for me. Not for your father. Not for anyone.

She was a psycho bitch, but the fucking words remained. She hated me for resembling my father. She hated Father for loving another woman, and she blamed me for it.

None of it made any fucking sense. But those words started a domino effect. Her words had proven right. At least as far as Father went. We no longer mattered to him. Vasili took over the role of father, caring for an adolescent younger brother and our baby sister. Not to mention, he ran the companies and the illegitimate side of our business.

You'll never be good enough.

I skimmed a thumb across her soft skin, cupping her cheek. And as if she craved my heat, she pressed her cheek into the palm of my hand.

My phone vibrated on the nightstand, and I reached for it.

Alessio: ***I want my sister back. Unharmed. Untouched. You psychotic fucking ass.***

Me: ***Your love notes make me cry. Don't worry about your sister. She's safe and no longer your concern.***

It took all of a millisecond for my phone to ring. My lips tugged up in a half-smile. Alessio. I should have known.

Careful not to wake up Branka, I got out of bed and pulled on a pair of jeans, then made my way to the balcony off of our bedroom.

“Hello?”

“Don’t you fucking hello me, Nikolaev.” Okay, Alessio was pissed off. “I should have known you couldn’t take no for an answer. Goddamn you.”

“I’m doing great,” I told him. “Weather is lovely. Food is great. And the company is the best.”

“You unhinged motherfucker,” he hissed. “Where in the fuck are you?”

“None of your business.”

If he thought I’d hand over Branka, he was out of his fucking mind.

“Put her on the phone,” he demanded.

“Little newsflash,” I drawled. “You don’t get to shout your demands. You can try, of course. But it’ll only make me hang up on you faster.”

Tense silence followed.

“How long?”

I frowned. “How long what?”

“How long have you had your sights on Branka?”

It was clear Branka didn’t share certain things with her big brother. Our meeting at Berkeley was something only the two of us knew about. I could lie. I should lie.

“It was when I told you she’s off limits. I just made her more tempting with those words four years ago. A forbidden fruit.”

Maybe that sealed it, but she was mine long before that. Those words pushed me to seek her out that night.

“Yeah, those words sealed it.” I settled for a half-truth.

He sighed tiredly.

“I don’t have the energy nor the time for your crazy ass,” he muttered. “Just give me my sister back.”

“You need to chill,” I told him coldly. “You’ll be dead by the time you have a newborn on your hands if you don’t calm down.”

“I swear to God, Sasha–”

“You’re not getting her back,” I said, my voice deadly calm. “Branka Russo is mine. Anyone tries to take her away from me, and you’ll see what a true psycho I am.”

I could hear his sardonic breath over the line. “Jesus Christ,” he muttered. “Sasha, Branka isn’t for you. She’s too–” He inhaled deeply, then

slowly exhaled. “She’s been hurt too much. She needs a good man. Someone who deserves her.”

Frustration ran through me, the unsaid words getting to me more than they should. They hit their mark, and I fucking hated the way it made me bleed. If he wasn’t Branka’s brother, I’d fly back and put a bullet in his forehead.

My finger itched for the trigger.

The pain I pictured on Branka’s face if she lost her brother sent an odd tightness to my chest. I shook my head. There was no use fooling myself. I couldn’t hurt a fly if it’d make Branka upset.

“She’s getting *me*,” I gritted. “Nobody else but me. So deal with it.”

“I want to talk to her.” His voice was cold, the slightest clench of his teeth notable even over the phone.

“She’s sleeping.”

A pause. “In the middle of the goddamn day?”

I realized my mistake immediately. It was daytime back in Canada and the East Coast.

“She was tired. We’ve been busy.”

I suddenly realized how that came off. Like we’d been fucking for hours. Jesus, just a few days with Branka and I was already slipping.

“You’re dead, you goddam Russian,” he roared. “Once I find you, I’ll strangle you.”

Jesus, the guy was hormonal. “You should try some breathing techniques,” I suggested calmly. “It’s clear the pregnancy is making you volatile.”

“You. Are. Making. Me. Volatile.” His voice was strained. “I’m going to murder your Russian ass.”

I grinned into the phone, although it wasn’t with my usual gusto. If Alessio hated my guts, it’d make Branka upset. It was the last thing I wanted.

“You’d make your sister a widow?” Jesus, I’d better find someone to marry us. As soon as possible.

“She’s marrying Killian, not you.” There might have been some smashing I heard in the background.

“Yeah, good luck with that,” I drawled. She’d marry someone else over my dead body. I was done with this exhausting call. “I’ll keep you informed

of our anniversaries and birthdays. When you come to terms with Branka and me, then we'll send you pictures of us and our family."

I ended the call without waiting for a response.

My eyes roamed the landscape around us. There was nothing for two hundred acres around us. If anyone attempted to approach the castle, they'd never have a chance to get near it without being noticed.

Still, the fear of losing Branka was like icy panic in my veins. I have been patient for seven years and almost lost her. Now, I needed her to come around and choose me. Tie her to me so nobody else could take her from me.

Blood raced through my veins. My pulse buzzed in my ears and my heart drummed too hard. It was usually what I felt before I made rash decisions.

Kill. Eliminate the obstacle.

I couldn't do that now. It would cost me the only thing I wanted.

I returned to the bedroom and watched Branka sleep. Her chest rose and fell, her breathing shallow. She looked so docile when sleeping, her lips slightly parted and the soft lines of her face inviting.

I slid into the bed and wrapped an arm around her waist and flattened my chest against her back. I buried my face into the back of her neck and inhaled deeply, her familiar flowery scent easing my restlessness. It was only the sight of her that calmed me, slowed the rush in my ears and the beat of my heart.

"*Ya tebya lyublyu, kotyonok*," I whispered into her ear.

It was the first time I said 'I love you' to a woman. Any woman.

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Chapter Fifty-Two

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BRANKA

My eyes opened to a dark room. I reached across the bed to find the sheets cold and empty. Sasha wasn't here. Disappointment washed over me.

I dragged myself into the bathroom, Sasha's cum leaking down my thighs. A condom had never occurred to either one of us. I swallowed hard, the idea of pregnancy filling me with anxiety. Sadness.

My heart grew heavy.

Would Sasha throw me away if he knew? *Defective.*

I swallowed hard. Babies and legacies were an important part of the underworld. Carrying a bloodline. Carrying the last name. Keeping shit within a family. Except, I didn't mind the Russo bloodline dying with me.

Except, I minded being left behind again.

My stomach turned and I steeled my spine. I cleaned myself up, peed, and then jumped into shower, ignoring all the heavy feelings in the pit of my stomach.

I showered, ate the food that was brought to me, then decided to explore the old castle. It wasn't like I had anything better to do. I drifted from room to room, luxury evident in every single corner of this home. I wasn't a history buff but my guess was that whoever owned this place had it restored to its original glory.

The castle dated back a few centuries to the good old days before the Russian Revolution.

I descended the large staircase when I heard the familiar, dark voice. My cheeks heated remembering how many times he took me last night.

Sasha was dominant and insatiable in the bedroom.

I followed the direction of the voice but each time I entered a room, I found it empty.

“You looking for Sasha?” I whirled around at the sound of a voice. I blinked, then blinked again.

The owner of that voice was tall, about six foot three or more. He wore a black shirt and pants with an open black cashmere coat. My eyebrows shot up. He really liked the color black. My gaze traveled to his face. Sharp, angular features and intense dark eyes. Dark brown hair.

He was a Konstantin. One of the twins. What was he doing here?

Then I remembered his question. “Yes, I’m looking for Sasha.”

“You’re in luck then,” he declared, putting his hands in his pockets, as if he tried to appear non-threatening. Yeah, no chance of that. He had that aura of ruthless, dangerous men. Much like my own brother. Very much like Sasha.

He was pleasant to look at but it was his unnerving eyes that made me want to run and hide. The way he watched me made me think he saw too much. Even the darkest secrets I hid from myself.

“I just left him in the library,” he said. “His brothers are with him.”

Alarm shot through me. I didn’t realize we’d turned this into a family reunion.

“Just them?” I asked cautiously. Did my brother find me?

His brows furrowed for a fraction of a moment, as if he could sense my fear. Like he was confused by it. But then his expression returned to an unreadable mask and we remained standing there. Unmoving. Unblinking.

“Yes, just *his* brothers.”

This man knew who I was. I’d stake my life on it. Yet as crazy as it sounded, I felt safe under Sasha’s protection. I shook my head at myself. The man dished out orgasms like it was candy and made my body melt, and suddenly I felt safe with him. Yeah, that was not my brain talking, but whatever.

“You look like you want to run?” he remarked, his voice calm. Like he purposely kept his tone low so he wouldn’t scare me. It was then that I realized my feet fidgeted, shifting from foot to foot, and I forced myself to stop.

I couldn’t remember the last time I ran from a man. It had been a while. Father and his fucking associate! He was the last man I ran from.

“I’m Ilias,” he introduced himself, extending his hand. “Ilias Konstantin.”

Hesitantly, I put my hand into his. “Branka.”

I learned a long time ago that it wasn’t smart to give out my last name. My father had too many enemies. Too many people he had wronged.

“Nice to meet you, Branka.” I tilted my head in acknowledgement. “How are you liking Russia so far?”

I shrugged, studying him. “I’ve only seen this house and the vast land stretching for miles,” I remarked dryly. “Summers are colder in Siberia though.”

He smiled, amused, and my mouth just about dropped. *Holy mother of God.* It was like being blinded by the sun. His sex appeal was overwhelming.

“And winters are even colder,” he noted amused.

A shiver rolled down my spine. I could only imagine miles and miles of deep snow. White as far as your eyes could see. Not my ideal winter scenario. Yes, I was from Canada, but it didn’t mean I loved freezing my butt off.

“Are you Sasha’s friend?” I asked curiously. This was the second time I’d seen him in Sasha’s vicinity. It couldn’t be a coincidence. “I’ve seen you before. In California.”

His lips pulled into the slightest smile. “I remember you,” he remarked.

Okay, that was worrisome. After all, that was seven years ago. “So, are you?” I asked again. When he cocked his eyebrow in question, I added, “Friends?”

“He probably wouldn’t put me in that category.” His tone was dry and his expression even drier. “Especially after the conversation we just had.”

My eyebrows shot up. “Huh?”

He tilted his head. “I’m afraid the Nikolaev brothers weren’t too happy with my demands on their sister.” He shook his head, agitation clear on his face. “That’s Tatiana’s only downfall. Her brothers.”

I frowned, utterly confused. Why was he telling me that? Something told me everything this guy did was with a purpose. He wasn’t the kind that made mistakes.

“And you’re probably wondering why I’m telling you that,” he drawled lazily, his smile distant. I nodded. It was odd that he was telling me

anything about Tatiana. After all, we were strangers. “Because you are *his* weakness, Branka Russo.”

Somehow it didn’t surprise me he knew who I was.

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Chapter Fifty-Three

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SASHA

I'd had Branka with me for barely three days and my phone hadn't stopped ringing. Nor have the visitors.

It was like a grand central station. Constant beeping, ringing, and talking. I could have done without the fucking visit by Ilias Konstantin though. Fucker! If he thought he'd ever get my sister, he had another thing coming. By Vasili's and Alexei's expressions, they agreed with me.

Much to my dismay as Ilias left the room, Tatiana entered. And by the fucker's expression, there'd be trouble coming our way eventually. He wouldn't give up; I'd stake my life on it.

I sat in the library-slash-office behind the desk, flipping my knife open, then closed. Open. Close.

Tense silence drifted through the air. Vasili sat on the chair opposite of me, Tatiana sat on the couch, and Alexei stood, leaning against the wall with his arms folded. The three of them showed up. Uninvited. Fucking stalkers. Although, I was happy to see Tatiana dressed in her signature black and white Chanel outfit rather than sweatpants.

Silence stretched throughout the room, my siblings' eyes on me. One set furious. One set unemotional. And one bored.

My muscles tightened, furious that the three of them were here. Couldn't a guy be left alone with the woman he loved? At least until I knocked her up and nobody could take her from me.

I leaned back in my chair. "How did you find me?"

"It was pretty easy," Tatiana answered, studying me with understanding.

Alexei's and Vasili's eyes both watched me with those inquisitive eyes, but it was Tatiana who I feared saw too much.

"The Russo woman doing okay?" Alexei asked.

I flipped the knife open, then closed it again. "Yes."

"Why did Ilias let you use his jet?" Vasili questioned.

I shrugged. "He likes me."

"Does he like the Russo girl too?" Vasili could be annoying as fuck. Although the idea of Ilias or anyone else making a move on Branka had aggravation lighting in my chest.

"If Ilias liked the Russo girl, he'd have taken her himself," Tatiana announced.

My gaze narrowed. What would my sister know about Illias? She'd only met him once.

Vasili and Alexei must have thought exactly the same because their gazes were focused on our baby sister.

She looked away, aware she slipped.

"You going to marry her?" Alexei asked in an indifferent voice. I didn't answer.

"I swear to God, Sasha," Vasili growled. "You better marry the girl. If we did all this so you could play your games with the girl and then get rid of her, I swear I'll kill you myself. And I'll find her a husband before her brother or Brennan realize you corrupted the woman."

I shot to my feet. "You even look her way and I'll end you." My voice was dark. My gaze even darker. "Don't ever bring that up again, Vasili."

My gaze would have killed anyone else. But not my brothers.

"Jesus," Tatiana muttered.

Vasili leaned back in the chair, studying me.

"So you obviously want to marry her. What's the fucking issue?" Vasili questioned.

The fucking issue was that I didn't want to force her to marry me. I wanted her to choose me. To want to marry me. Of course, I hoped she'd get knocked up. Insurance.

"No issues," I grumbled. "Now please fuck off. All three of you. We'll get married when we are damn good and ready." *When Branka is ready.*

His lips curved up and a smile played in his eyes. Son of a bitch. "Karma truly is a bitch," he drawled, satisfied.

My jaw tightened. Vasili could be such a fucking prick.

“When are you three leaving?” I said through clenched teeth.

Vasili got to his feet, fixing his suit sleeve. “I think I’m going to stay for a few days.”

“No, you won’t,” I gritted. “I don’t need you shadowing me. Did I nag you when you had your shit going on with Isabella? No, I didn’t.” Tatiana rolled her eyes. “All three of you. Grab some food out of the kitchen and get back to New Orleans.”

“You hurt my feelings,” Alexei deadpanned.

Thick silence shrouded the room.

“Did you just crack a joke?” I said incredulously. Alexei never joked around. He barely even smiled.

Alexei’s attention zeroed in on me. “I’m staying. Got to look out for my crazy brother.”

Tatiana ganged up on me. “Me too.”

“How long?” I asked.

“How long what?” Vasili deigned to pretend not to understand.

“How long will you stay?” I gritted.

Having siblings had its perks, but they could be so goddamn annoying.

“A few days, give or take.”

The three of them headed out of the room, probably conspiring how to make my life hell over the next few days.

FUCKING ILLIAS KONSTANTIN.

He conveniently slipped my itinerary to Vasili. This was supposed to be my time with Branka. Not a fucking honeymoon with family. The sound of voices and laughter came from outside and I glanced out the window.

“The whole fucking family,” I gritted. My brothers brought their spouses and their kids. How in the fuck was I supposed to be fucking my woman in every corner of this castle if they were all here?

I caught a glimpse of Branka in her bikini, sitting on the edge of the pool and my dick twitched. She looked heart-stoppingly gorgeous in her red and white bikini. Little Kostya sat on her lap, babbling and his tiny legs wiggling. He wanted to be taken into the water. The boy was like a little fish. Good thing that the pool was heated.

Leaving my spot, I headed into the room I shared with Branka and changed into a pair of swimming shorts, then headed to the pool. And all the while I grumbled, pissed off my family crashed my fucking party.

When I stopped beside the pool, everyone's eyes came up to me. Little Kostya and Nikola gave me their toothy grins, their chubby hands reaching for me. It was all it took for my frustration to dissipate.

I walked into the water and took a seat next to Branka, shoving Alexei out of the way. He was like a dark shadow over his Kostya who kicked and grinned. He was content sitting on her lap. What the fuck did Alexei think Branka would do? Drop him in the water while his parents and uncles swam around.

"Hey, Sasha," Aurora greeted me. "Still causing trouble, I see."

Wrapping my hand around Branka's shoulder, I grinned. "Hey, Aurora. Still annoying, I see."

Branka shoved her shoulder into me. "Be nice," she scolded softly.

I grinned. "Always." Then I narrowed my eyes on Alexei. "Unless you want to be drowned in the kiddie pool, don't sit so fucking close to my woman."

Alexei flipped me the bird, his face an unemotional mask. As always. My mother managed to fuck him up the most, kidnapping him as a child from Alexei's own mother, Marietta Taylor.

Yeah, we were certainly all shades of fucked up. Vasili was guilt driven. Alexei was physically and mentally damaged thanks to my vindictive bitch of a mother. Tatiana never had either parent so maybe she lucked out.

And I… Well, I guess I turned out perfect, I thought sarcastically.

Truth was I'd trust Alexei and Vasili in the same room as Branka naked. Not that I'd ever allow them to see her naked.

Kostya gave me a toothy grin, and I reached out to stroke his blonde hair. "I guess we can be nice for a little bit. For my kotyonok."

A snicker came from my sister who was sunbathing.

"He calls you kitten?" she questioned Branka. Branka glanced at her, then her eyes darted to me and back to Tatiana to nod. "Fuck, I'd cut his balls off for that."

Branka frowned. "Why?"

"I better be a fucking queen. Not a kitten."

Branka chuckled. "I'm more the carve out a man's heart kind of girl. But not for something like that."

I pressed my mouth to Branka's forehead, then said, "She's not a kitten. She's a tigress."

Vasili had little Nikola sitting on his shoulders as he made his way through the water. Isabella was sitting on the opposite side of the pool, reading some medical journal. Her little daughter slept in the carrier with an umbrella over her and Isabella ignoring us all.

"Vasili, don't give Sasha a hard time," she warned her husband without lifting her head.

"Malyshka, do I ever give anyone a hard time?" Vasili grumbled.

"All the fucking time," all of us retorted dryly at the same time.

Vasili flipped us all the bird. "So this whole time, it's been about you, Branka Russo, huh?" Vasili said casually. She flicked a hesitant gaze to me, then back to my big brother. "Welcome to the family."

Branka's cheeks stained red and it had nothing to do with the Russian summer heat.

Ignoring my big brother's comment, she turned her face to Alexei. "Should I take Kostya into the water for a swim? Or do you prefer to?"

Alexei watched her in his way that usually had people squirming or shitting their pants.

I was just about to tell him to quit it when Aurora asked, "How come Alexei doesn't scare you?" She tilted her head, studying Branka pensively.

Branka shrugged, handing Kostya back to his father. "Maybe I've seen scarier shit."

She jumped into the water and Kostya let out a screech, ready to abandon the safety of his father and go to Branka. Maybe my family coming wasn't such a bad idea. My heart swelled with pride seeing my woman with my family. She belonged here. In our family.

Isabella closed the magazine with a soft thud and threw it on the ground.

Vasili turned to look at his wife. So did all of us.

"What's the matter, malyshka?" Vasili demanded to know. God help anyone who upset his wife.

Isabella slid into the pool and swam over to us.

"Malyshka?"

She waved her hand off. "A friend's article didn't make it into the journal," she muttered, then smiled, reaching for her eldest son. "Come off daddy's shoulders, Nikola. Swim with mama."

Without fear, he let go of his father’s shoulders and jumped in. Jesus Christ. The boy was reckless.

As if he read my mind, Vasili confirmed. “Boy is as reckless as Sasha.”

“Oh come on, brother,” Tatiana exclaimed, getting up from her lounge chair and headed towards the edge of the pool. “All of us Nikolaev’s are reckless. And fucked up.”

Tatiana jumped into the pool, her head disappearing.

“Is she still drinking?” I asked, flicking a glance at my brothers.

“She hasn’t touched alcohol today,” Vasili said as our sister came up for air. Shaking water off her face, she climbed onto a large pink dolphin and grabbed his neck, then leaned back ready to lounge.

“So you’re Mia’s sister, huh?” she asked. “You look like her. At least her picture. Funny, I always thought Mia was Sasha’s long lost love.” She chuckled. “I was so wrong.”

Tension swept through the pool. The air stilled.

Fuck.

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Chapter Fifty-Four

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BRANKA

Four days of summer in Siberia.

Thankfully the pool was heated. And I had to admit, Sasha's family was tense but nice. Kostya laughed and babbled in my arms, reminding me of my own nephew.

Thinking of my brother, Autumn, and my nephew, conflict arose in me. I missed them. I wanted to talk to them.

"So you're Mia's sister, huh?" Tatiana remarked. "You look like her. At least her picture. Funny, I always thought Mia was Sasha's long lost love." She chuckled. "I was so wrong."

Confusion shot through me and my eyes darted between all of them.

"What do you mean?" I asked hesitantly.

"You didn't tell her," Alexei stated, his voice unemotional.

I swallowed. "Tell me what?" I questioned. "How do you all know Mia? And what do you mean Mia was Sasha's–" I took a deep breath. "Sasha's–" I couldn't even say it.

Sasha and Mia. Jesus Christ, Sasha and Mia.

I was just a substitute.

Tatiana shook her head. "Shit, shit, shit. Sorry. I just thought–" Sasha's sister straightened on the ridiculous dolphin, balancing herself. "I shouldn't have said anything. I'm so sorry."

"No, you should have told me," I said, my voice strangely calm. I shifted to face Sasha. "Or even better, Sasha should have told me."

I swam to the edge of the pool and climbed out of it, water dripping off me.

“Branka, wait.” His voice was right behind me. I could feel his heat at my back. I couldn’t get away from him fast enough.

Suddenly, anger shot through me. “Wait for what? The phone you promised me days ago? Until you tell me it’s okay to call my brother or my friend?” I shoved my hand through my damp hair. “Seven fucking years and you didn’t think to mention once you pined after my sister.”

I didn’t care about the audience. My body shivered. Either from the cooler summer temperatures in Siberia or my heart cracking.

My heart thundered in my chest, each beat hurting more than the last. Sasha owned me. My heart. My soul. My body. And all along I was his consolation prize. For my sister.

Sasha’s hand wrapped around my wrist.

“Kotyonok,” he growled.

I snatched my wrist out of his grip. “Don’t fucking kotyonok to me. I want to go home,” I hissed. “To my family. My life.”

“You’re not going anywhere,” Sasha warned, a dark expression on his face. He stepped closer, completely ignoring my personal space. “You’re mine. No one else can have you.”

I lost it. I shoved against his chest. Over and over again. But he stood there like a stone wall. Immobile.

“You don’t get to decide that,” I screamed. “You can’t make someone be yours.”

Something crossed his expression but I was too angry to stop. I was too hurt to evaluate it. I pushed against him. He held me against his body and I shifted and bit into his upper arm. He was startled and released me.

I whirled around and stormed back inside. Once out of the Nikolaev’s view, I ran all the way to the bedroom and locked the door behind me. Panic in my veins and heart in my throat, I leaned back against the door.

“Kotyonok, open the door,” Sasha demanded, his voice too calm for comfort. But I wasn’t fooled. The man was a ticking bomb. “Five seconds. Then I’m breaking down the door.”

I ignored him, my eyes frantically traveling over the room. I ran over to the window, although I knew there was no way of escape there. There was nowhere else to go. I whirled around.

Bang!

I jumped back, hitting my head against the window. The door flew open and slammed against the wall with such force, it left a mark on the stone

wall. Eyes lifting to meet his pale blue ones, something deep and raw in them paralyzed me.

My chest heaved. Sasha moved toward me, like a predator for his prey. My back hit the cold stone wall, sending goosebumps over my skin. I held my breath, unsure what to expect from him. I reached for the first object within my reach and threw it at him. He evaded it and it shattered against the wall. I reached for the next object and hurled it his way. He evaded that one too.

Grabbing my wrists into an unyielding grip, he reached for a belt on the nearby stand and wrapped it around my wrists. He stepped back and yanked on the belt. I kicked and screamed, yelling all kinds of obscenities at him.

He gripped my face, lifting it so I would meet his eyes. “Calm down.”

“Fuck you,” I hissed. “I hate your guts.”

Even as I said those words, I knew they were lies. I fell for the psychotic asshole and he was using me as a substitute for my dead sister. She *was* a better person than me. I knew it. I loved her. But this still fucking hurt.

“You have a temper, kotyonok.” His hand came around my neck and held it firmly. “You’ll calm down and we’ll talk.”

“I don’t want to talk. I want to leave this place. And you.”

Something passed through his eyes but then hardened. Into a cold blue stone.

His thumb brushed my fluttering pulse and I let out a shaky breath. The contrast of his cold expression and his caress lit a lightning bolt in my veins.

“Leaving me will never be an option, kotyonok.”

His thumb ran across my lips, rubbing it gently. My mouth parted and he pushed it slightly into my mouth. The low growl in his throat sent desire pooling to my lower belly. Mad at the lust that still lingered, I sunk my teeth into his flesh.

He hissed, but he didn’t remove his finger. My heart pattered in wild beats, his hard body pressed against mine.

“Is that clear?” There was a rough edge to his voice. It wrapped around my body and squeezed. Like a blanket. Like a rope.

“Crystal clear,” I breathed. “I am your prisoner.”

A sardonic breath left him. “Wrong, kotyonok. You are my everything. You’re upset, we’ll talk it out. You’re mad, we’ll cool you off and then

we’ll talk it out.” His jaw ticked. The dark expression on his face was frightening.

His hands held my chin and he brought his face inches from mine. I held my breath. I waited. He’d kiss me.

He didn’t.

“You leaving me… That. Will. Never. Be. An. Option.”

Then he bit my bottom lip. Hard. Drawing blood.

It was appropriate really. Considering how our story started.

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Chapter Fifty-Five

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SASHA

She dismissed me like I was nothing to her.

I'd burn down this world for her and she treated this thing between us like it was just sex. I'd give my life just to hear her say she loved me. *Once*.

Pathetic really, considering the way she watched me. Her eyes glimmered full of distaste and hate. She couldn't wait to leave me and I couldn't fucking live without her.

The hollow ache in my chest expanded. It grew and grew until it was a large black hole. Pain sliced through me like a razor-sharp knife. I was in so fucking deep and she was ready to just walk away. Without talking. Without working through it.

My feelings have gotten out of hand. What I felt for her was so fucking deep that I couldn't find my way up for air.

I leaned in and nipped her bottom lip. To punish. To mark.

"I want to call my brother," she demanded, her voice breathy.

"No." That time has come and gone. I needed more time. The rest of our lives.

Fury flared in her eyes.

It was definitely the wrong time to give her the phone now. She'd cry to her brother and then there would be war. Goddamn it, I should have given it to her for that short period of time that things were good between us.

"I don't want you to touch me," she hissed.

That hurt.

I took her wrists, still tied in the belt, and put them above her head, pressed against the wall.

“Tell me why you’re mad?” I ordered, my tone harsh. She turned her face away from me and I took it between my fingers, while still holding her wrists above her head.

Her lips pressed into a thin line, her chin in a stubborn tilt.

“Do I need to spank you?”

Her spine stiffened and she started bucking against me.

“Don’t you fucking dare.”

I stroked a stray strand of her hair off her forehead with a finger. My inked fingers against her pale skin looked dirty. Unworthy.

Mother’s words uttered to that little boy decades ago came back with a vengeance.

In one swift move, I scooped her up, then sat down on the bed. Her stomach across my knees, I admired her round ass.

“Don’t you dare spank me, Sasha,” she hissed, bucking like a wildcat. Luckily for her, I was stronger than her, My palm on the small of her back, I kept her in place. “I swear to God. I’m going to–”

“What?” I drawled lazily, although my anger simmered under my skin. “Tell your brother? Carve my heart out.” She stilled. “You already stole my heart. Tattooed your goddamn initials on it. Do your worst, kotyonok.”

I untied the side strings of the bikini and my dick instantly hardened. I knew she could feel it, pressing against her lower belly. Pressing my palm on her round ass, I kept kneading her soft flesh, readying her for her punishment.

A soft moan vibrated, but it was cut short.

Stubborn woman.

She had the ability to drive me fucking insane.

Slap.

She jerked against me. “Stop,” she breathed out, her ass clenching.

Slap.

Her hands clenched, her nails digging into my thighs.

I landed another slap on her gorgeous red ass. Her body jolted forward and I could smell her arousal. She was my perfect match. Just as depraved as me. She had another thing coming if she thought I’d ever let her go.

I’d fuck her raw. Leave my mark on every inch of her skin and soul. I’d never hurt her but I’d ensure everyone who looked at her knew she was

mine.

“You ready to talk?” I asked.

Her body stiffened. I could hear her little growl. I didn’t have to see her face to know her eyes flashed like two lightning bolts against the dark sky.

“Screw you, Nikolaev.”

I lifted my hand and brought it down to her reddened ass. *Slap.* This time she couldn’t hold back her moan. Her voice was lustful and her ass pushed into my hand. Greedy woman. She wanted to be mad and fucked at the same time.

A trickle of her arousal glistened on her inner thigh. I pushed my finger deeper between her legs, circling her slick folds until a throaty whimper escaped her throat. I smeared her juices over her entrance, then brought her slippery juices to her asshole.

“You’re wet for me.” My tone was smug but I couldn’t help it. She couldn’t take her lust away from me. Her arousal was all for me.

I smeared her wetness around her asshole and pushed gently. Her muscles clenched around the tip of my finger.

“I am going to claim this,” I rasped. “I’m going to own all your firsts and your lasts.”

Then I pulled out my finger and dragged it down her folds. Without warning, I thrust two fingers inside her in one go and slapped her ass cheek at the same time.

She moaned but quickly muffled her sounds with her hand. “You’re going to give me everything, kotyonok.”

I pushed my fingers in and out, hard until I was knuckles deep inside her tight cunt.“

Her body quivered, shudders rolled down her spine while I pounded my fingers inside her over and over, then slapped her ass. The sound of skin slapping and her muffled moans filled the room. I could feel she was close, her inner muscles clenching around my fingers and her body tensing with the need for release.

Then, she unraveled out of nowhere. She screamed and not even her hand could muffle that sound. Her body shook and her nails dug into my thighs.

I’ll need another tattoo, I thought smugly.

Her breathing was labored and I didn't ease my thrusting until I had wrung every single ounce of pleasure out of her.

When her body went limp, I pulled out of her drenched pussy.

"Look at me," I demanded harsher than I intended. My cock was throbbing like a motherfucker.

Languid from the orgasm, she watched me through her half-lidded eyes. Our gazes locked, our battle of wills tilted into my favor thanks to her pleasure.

I licked my fingers clean as she watched me, her cheeks flushed from the pleasure I wrenched out of her. God, I fucking loved tasting her. She was my own brand of cocaine. My vice.

"This… you and me… it's for life, kotyonok," I rasped. "I waited too long to give you up now." I shifted her off me and tucked her under the covers, while her eyes remained on me. She didn't say anything. She hid herself well. "Search me out when you're ready to talk."

I left her in the room without another word, stationing a guard in front of the door. I'd have the door fixed so I could lock her in it until she came to her senses.

If I was unworthy, I'd find a way to be worthy of her.

I wanted her to choose me willingly. But that couldn't happen if she ran from me.

ONE WHOLE DAY and she refused to come out of the room.

Stubborn woman!

At least she ate. Tatiana assured me of that. My sister felt guilty for slipping about Mia, but the truth was I should have told Branka about her sister a long time ago.

I sat on the side of the bed. It was well past midnight and Branka was sound asleep, her breathing shallow and her brows furrowed. I reached out and smoothed the lines, hating that she was worried even in her sleep. I've waited for her to calm down and seek me out. I should have known she'd dig in her heels. We'd have to talk eventually.

Fuck, I'd have to talk to her brother eventually too. Hopefully, we both came out of it alive. Unable to stop myself, I trailed my hand from her ankle, up her legs and stopped at her bare thigh.

Her lips parted and a soft moan slipped from her lips as she pushed her thighs apart. She might fight me when awake, but when she slept she purred like a kitten for me. A sardonic breath left me and my throat tightened, leaving me with a bitter taste.

I wanted her to purr for me when she was awake too. I wanted her to love me and want to stay with me because fuck if I was letting her go. I wouldn't be so deep into us alone. She'd be neck deep into it too.

My phone buzzed and I reached for it, expecting a specific message. I wasn't disappointed. It was a message from Nico.

It was an address. The current location of the fucker who dared to touch Branka. And how fucking convenient he was currently hiding in Russia. Ah, the small things. I grinned sardonically, ready to dish out pain.

I typed a quick thank you and shot it back to Nico. It was good to have friends in high places. Nico always came through.

Before I could put my phone away, it buzzed again.

Alessio is on the warpath. Might want to reach out. To both her brother and fiancé.

It was the only downfall to having mutual friends with the brother of the woman you kidnapped. Of course, he was right. I'd have to work out things with Alessio. Killian I didn't give a fuck about. He was lucky he wasn't missing a limb.

Anyhow, I wouldn't be making peace with Branka's brother today. It'd be a job for another day. Today, I'd be hunting for the ghost that dared hurt my woman when she was a child.

I sent him off a quick thank you and strode to the closet where our things still sat in suitcases. Branka didn't want to unpack. Not that I blamed her. This wasn't our home. I hoped we'd come to some kind of middle ground, and then we'd tell her brother as a couple that we were in this together. Branka and I. And then we'd head back to New Orleans. *Home.*

This lengthy detour wasn't anticipated.

I changed into a Givenchy suit. There was no need for jeans and boots. It wouldn't be me doing the killing this time around. This was exclusively for Branka. I secured a handgun and a knife into my holsters - one on my ankle and one strapped over my shoulder.

I strode out of the bedroom, locking it behind me. I had the only key. I trusted my brothers and in-laws, but I couldn't risk losing her. Okay, so maybe that meant I didn't trust them with her but what-the-fuck-ever.

When you had something that meant so much, you couldn’t let go. I pushed my hand through my hair.

Jesus Christ!

I was losing my shit. Just like my mother.

“Where are you going?”

Alexei’s voice came from the dark corner.

“Shouldn’t you be in bed?” I retorted dryly, ignoring his question. “Don’t tell me you can’t sleep. Your wife is here. It’s the only time you sleep.”

“Trying to keep you alive,” he said in a toneless voice.

So much for good friends in high places, I thought sarcastically.

“Don’t need a babysitter.” I kept walking. If I was to make it to Moscow and back by morning, I had to get moving. Alexei’s boots sounded behind me. “Not tonight, brat.”

“You won’t even know I’m with you.” Alexei could blend in shadows and stalk you for years without ever being detected. Unfortunately for him, I could. It was part of my DNA. I stopped and narrowed my eyes on him, ready to put him to sleep by punching him in the face. “You don’t have time to waste,” he reasoned coldly.

I sighed. He was right.

I didn’t have time for this.

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Chapter Fifty-Six

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BRANKA

I peeled my eyes open, blinking against the light coming from the windows. A cool draft touched my shoulder and a shiver ran through me.

Summer in Siberia sucked.

I needed it hot and humid. Not fucking cool.

At the sound of paper crinkling, I froze and slowly turned my head around. Tatiana sat on the window seat, shoving a piece of chewing gum into her mouth and a kindle on her lap.

Her hair shone like spun gold. It was only now that I realized her blonde hair was slightly darker, more golden, than her brothers'.

"What are you doing here?" It had been over twenty-four hours since I talked to another human being.

Tatiana shrugged. "I picked the lock." My eyebrows shot up, impressed she knew how to do that. "I figured you wanted company."

"Thanks," I murmured, shifting into a sitting position. Our eyes locked and I swore, she was watching me with a hint of judgment in her eyes. An uneasy tension was suffocating and I waited for her to say something, but she remained quiet.

"What?" I snapped, tired of this fucked up situation. My ass burned. My head hurt. But most of all, my heart hurt.

"Do you love him?" Her question was calm, but vehemence vibrated in her voice. God, these Nikolaevs would be the death of me. For the short time in the pool, I really enjoyed them but then shit went to hell.

“He kidnapped me,” I answered instead, but my expression must have told her what she needed to know.

She sighed and muttered, “So stubborn. No wonder he fell for you.”

“He fell for me?” The words slipped and it was too late to retract them.

She rolled her eyes. “He’s not in the habit of just kidnapping women,” she muttered. “In fact, you’re the first one.”

I narrowed my eyes. “What about Wynter?”

She waved her hand, like she was shooing a fly. “No, he helped Wynter,” she answered, confirming her brother’s words. “She didn’t want to go back to her uncle until she was ready.”

She produced another wrapper from somewhere. “Want gum?”

“I just woke up,” I told her, pushing my hands through my hair. “Why are you here anyhow?”

She rolled her eyes. “Aurora and Isabella are talking babies. I love babies as much as the next person, but there is only so much baby talk I can handle.” She smiled. “Besides, I want to help my brother. I fucked up when I brought up your sister.”

“You said something he should have told me a long time ago,” I grumbled.

“Seven years, huh?” she questioned, studying me. When I gave her a confused look, she clarified, “You two have known each other for seven years and he never said a word to anyone about you.”

I shrugged. “Maybe I wasn’t worth mentioning.”

She grinned, that smile reminding me so much of her brother. “Sasha always says things that are not worth mentioning. The things that he should say, or someone he should mention, he never brings up.”

I hesitated, the logic making absolutely no sense.

She rolled her eyes, then smiled innocently. “I didn’t say it makes sense,” she retorted dryly. “That’s just how Sasha operates.”

“Where is he anyhow?”

“He and Alexei snuck out in the middle of the night,” she stated, then made air quotations. “Something important.” I stared at her, while her eyes shone with amusement. “Probably to kill someone.”

God, it was only… my eyes flickered to the clock… nine in the morning and my head was starting to hurt already.

She slipped off the windowsill and came to sit on the edge of the bed. “So you love him,” she declared.

Seeing my confused expression, she just chuckled. It was way too early for this. And on an empty stomach. There should be a rule about heavy topics before you brush your teeth, at least.

“Tatiana, it's a bit early for this,” I said dryly. “Unless you’re willing to give me a phone so I can call my brother, I’d rather just be alone.”

For some reason, my tone amused her. She flopped herself next to me on the pillows, like she readied for a long discussion.

“God, these sheets smell like sex.”

I was fucking mortified. The Nikolaev family should get a tattoo that read ‘certifiably crazy’ so everyone could steer clear. She stared at the ceiling, as if she was thinking.

“Did you know that my mother killed herself?” My eyes darted her way in surprise. She held my gaze and I shook my head. I didn’t know much about Sasha. He always asked questions about me, but rarely talked about himself. “Yep, she was batshit crazy. She caused Alexei to grow up imprisoned and tortured, slipped date rape drugs to my father so he’d sleep with her. Guess who's the product of that union?” I blinked. “Yep, you got it. Moi.”

Okay, maybe their family was a bit fucked up like mine.

“I’m sorry,” I murmured softly, putting my hand over hers.

She shrugged. “Honestly, I didn’t witness any of it since my brothers are so much older. I was spared.” She turned her head my way, her blue eyes reminding me of the clear Mediterranean sky. “Sasha not so much.”

“What do you mean?” I whispered, feeling like I was invading something I shouldn’t.

“He should tell you his story,” she remarked. “I only know what the surveillance showed. She was going to jump with me and kill us both. I was barely a few weeks old. Sasha convinced her to give me to him and then she jumped.”

“In front of him?” I croaked, trying to picture a little boy seeing his mother kill herself.

She nodded. “I’m not a shrink, but there is something about him and trying to save women from killing themselves.”

A tense, pensive silence permeated the air and both of us returned our attention to the ceiling. Ghosts lurked. Revelations danced.

“My sister committed suicide,” I finally said. “I was too young for the meaning of it to register.” Plus I just endured two years of my father and his

games so it was hard to grieve her properly. “My mother tried too, but I was just a baby then so I don’t remember.”

She nodded in understanding. She could really relate.

“Talk to Sasha,” she suggested softly. “I think he feels responsible for your sister’s death.”

My stomach tightened. A burn stung the back of my eyes.

Without warning, she jumped off the bed and sauntered to the door. She stepped into the hallway and glanced over her shoulder to look at me.

“If you love him, no matter what he has done, you’ll fight for him.”

She left the door open as she disappeared from my sight.

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Chapter Fifty-Seven

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BRANKA

Tap. Tap. Tap.

My fingers tapped against the window, but I didn't bother looking at the landscape that stretched for miles. My eyes were locked on the open door. First, I waited for Tatiana to return. She didn't. Then I expected it to be a trap. It wasn't.

I'd spent six hours and twenty minutes in this room with the door open. I took a shower, brushed my teeth, ate my breakfast and all the while, the bedroom door remained open.

A middle-aged woman came to clean up the room. She eyed me suspiciously as if she thought I was an idiot for remaining in this bedroom with the door clearly wide open.

"Where is Sasha?" I asked.

Flicking me a glance, her answer was a scowl, then she resumed her activities. I headed for the door and found myself in the hallway. There was nobody there to stop me. So I continued my path down the hallway. Down the stairs, through the large ballroom where Kostya, Aurora, Nikola, Isabella, and her little baby girl sat in a circle.

"Hey Branka," Isabella greeted me. "Want to join us? We're playing musical chairs."

I blinked, then slowly looked around. "There are no chairs," I remarked.

She grinned. "It's a disaster with the chairs. This is better."

"Thanks for the invite," I muttered. "I'm actually looking for Sasha. Is he here?"

The glance Aurora and Isabella shared didn’t escape me. “He’s in the gym,” Isabella answered.

“Alone?” Another shared glance. “What?” I questioned hesitantly.

Compassion filled Aurora’s expression. “Sasha’s kind of protective,” she murmured. “Even though he can drive me nuts.” I frowned, not following what she was saying at all. “When someone hurts people under his protection, he goes into Nikolaev mode.”

“Nikolaev mode?” I repeated slowly, sure I heard her wrong.

Isabella rolled her eyes. “Yeah, the mode where they kill anyone and everyone who looks at us wrong.”

“They are protective,” Aurora reasoned. “Overprotective. But I’d take that over the alternative any day.”

“Alternative?”

“Yeah. A parent that puts their kids at risk,” Aurora muttered.

I studied her. She was Senator Ashford’s daughter. Alessio’s half-sister. She came to my brother’s wedding and my bachelorette party, but I didn’t exactly get up close and personal.

“Senator Ashford put you at risk?” I questioned.

Her gaze flicked out the window and something dark crossed her expression. “My father is trying to atone for his sins. But he’s committed too many. My brother, Kingston, paid for them. Alessio paid for them. Everyone around him pays for them, one way or another.”

I was starting to see we all carried a family burden in one way or another. Some were heavier than the others but burdens either way. Sasha was no exception.

“He won’t hurt Alessio again, will he?” I asked worriedly. My brother had been through enough. His hard-earned happiness shouldn’t be taken from him. My nephew deserved both parents. Happy parents. “If he hurts my brother, I’ll destroy him,” I threatened in a low voice.

“Don’t worry.” Aurora assured. “Father needs Alessio. He’ll play nice.”

“Where is the gym?” I asked, determination settling inside me. “I’m going to go find Sasha.”

“Out the door, left and second right,” Isabella instructed. “He’s a good man, Branka.”

“I know.”

Maybe it was time we both came clean with each other.

I FOUND THE GYM, following the muffled voices. Men's voices.

I pushed the door open and my heart froze. The Nikolaev men surrounded my nightmare. An anchor pulled me deeper and deeper into the dark oceans.

"Remember me, little girl?"

Closing my eyes, I counted to five, then opened them.

"Time to play, little girl."

Nausea hit me. My skin turned cold and clammy.

Blood dripped onto the ground. *Drip. Drip. Drip.* The man who tortured me when I was that little eight-year-old girl. He hung off the same rope as a punching bag, his head bowed and bloody. He was naked, except for his boxers and there were knife cuts all over his chest.

I took a deep breath, then slowly exhaled. Again and again. Yet, it did nothing to calm my wild heartbeat. My lungs hurt with each breath, like shards of ice against my sensitive skin.

My hands trembled. I swallowed, then swallowed again. Terror crawled up my spine and refused to leave. He was tied up, not me. Yet, I was the one shaking.

Hands cupped my cheeks and forced my eyes away from the threat.

"Kotyonok." I blinked. I wasn't looking at him, but I still only saw him. "Kotyonok, look at me." The order was soft and vehement. It wasn't until I drowned in those pale blue eyes that my tremors slowly eased. There was peace and safety in those eyes. The wild thundering in my chest slowed with each breath.

It was only then that I realized Vasili and Alexei stood behind Sasha, their expressions grim and concerned.

My eyes slowly traveled from Sasha to Vasili, then to Alexei and back to Sasha.

"Sasha thought he–" he tilted his chin to the man hanging like a piece of meat about to be dried, "–was a romantic present," Alexei deadpanned.

My eyes flickered back to Sasha. "It's your choice how he dies." God, my eyes and my throat burned. "But he will die. For what he did to you."

How did he know? Then I remembered the scar. The only scar I kept. But that was hardly evidence of this man's identity. Not even I knew his name. Only his face.

“Did Mia tell you?” I choked out, my own voice sounding distant to my ears.

“Not everything.” I dragged a deep breath into my lungs. It wasn’t enough. There wasn’t enough oxygen in this world for this man who hurt me and my sister.

The expressions on the Nikolaevs faces was murderous, and suddenly I understood exactly what Aurora meant. There was a cruel, twisted glint in their eyes that promised retribution. Aurora’s brothers were protective. My brother was protective. But compared to the Nikolaev men, our brothers were normal.

The Nikolaev men’s protection went up a few notches, into a sick and psychotic level, and I didn’t mind it.

Not. One. Bit.

It wasn’t until this very moment that I realized this man still lurked in the corners of my mind. That little girl still feared that he’d come back for me and hurt me again.

The palm of my hand burned. I wanted to make him pay. For Mia. For me. For our family. For every tear and every scream that tore through us. I rounded the three of them, the disturbing hardness and glints in their eyes not alarming. I wasn’t afraid of them.

The monster hanging off the ceiling, on the other hand, terrified me. There were different kinds of monsters walking this earth. The ones that protected you from the monsters like this fucker who had ruined my sister and me. And then there were men like my brother and the Nikolaev men who were ruthless, but because they had to be. To protect us.

As I neared the battered body, the man opened his eyes, blood dripping off his forehead. He spotted me and he froze. Understanding entered his eyes. He blubbered something unintelligible and I realized then, he couldn’t talk.

“Sasha cut out his tongue,” Vasili remarked coldly.

“He was annoying me,” Sasha said, his voice deadly. “All that begging for mercy.”

Fear clouded the man’s eyes that were glued to me, that glassy eye still there. A reminder of my fight. Of my screams. He didn’t spare the Nikolaev men behind me another glance. He knew it was all in my hands now. Unfortunately for him, I was my father’s daughter too, and I didn’t believe in mercy.

I turned to Sasha, watching me. Possessively. Obsessively. Protectively. Like I was his. And I was. I'd been his for a long time.

My eyes lowered to the gun in his holster. Without question, he pulled it out and handed it to me. The metal was cold in my hands. I wasn't a killer, but I did believe in vengeance.

I lifted my gun, the barrel of it pointing at his face.

Tears began to fall down his cheeks, mixing with the blood. He shook his head frantically, buckling, his body swinging back and forth.

"Eye for an eye," I said, my voice calm and my aim deadly.

Bang.

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Chapter Fifty-Eight

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SASHA

Tigress.

Branka has been a fighter her whole life, and I couldn't be more proud. She could have asked me and my brothers to pull the trigger so she'd keep her hands clean. But that wasn't who my kotyonok was.

She ended the miserable existence of the bastard.

I knew Mia and Branka didn't know the name of the man that rained cruelty on them. But the fucker should have known nothing remained hidden for long in this world.

Leaving the dead body behind for Vasili and Alexei to handle, I led her away from death and into life. She belonged among the living. She deserved happiness. She deserved to always come first.

Once outside, she tilted her face to the sun. It made her hair glow in all colors of the fall - red, honey, brown, even blonde. I reached for a strand, marveling at the silkiness of her curls. She was strong because she had to be. To survive. But deep down she had a soft and loyal heart that was the biggest prize a man could earn.

"It's never hot here?" she asked, her face still facing the sky.

I knew she didn't particularly care for the Siberian summer. Neither did I. But my parents' home was the most remote place for us to stay. It was where I knew she'd be safe.

"Very rarely." She let out a heavy sigh. "You're okay?" I asked her.

Flicking a side glance my way, she nodded. Her eyes were metal gray. They weren't sad but they weren't happy. Anything short of happiness wasn't good enough for her. She deserved it all. Her old man should have

been torched. It made me want to go back, dig him up and then torture his corpse.

It might be slightly overboard though.

“Yes, thank you.” After a moment of silence, she continued, “I never knew his name.” I watched her delicate neck move up and down. “Thank you for making him pay. It brought closure.”

I nodded. The man was a fucking coward. Her father even more so for selling his daughters like that. He kept their virginities intact, but he gave that sick bastard free reign on everything else.

She returned to look at the sky and I waited. I wanted her to talk to me, but that was one thing I couldn’t force out of her.

“Am I a substitute for her?” Her voice was barely audible, her eyes still glued to the sky. “Is that why you want me?”

“I cared for Mia, but she isn’t you.” Her eyes lowered, studying me. “Your resemblance starts and stops with your physical appearance. I worried about her. I wanted to save her. And I made her a promise.”

“A promise?”

“Yes, a promise. That I’d watch over you and your brother. That I’d protect you. So since you were ten-years-old, I’ve watched you. I watched your brother beat up your father at Mia’s burial and I knew you’d be safe. But I kept watching over you. I watched a bruised little girl grow up into a stunning, strong woman.” I took her face between my palms and pulled her closer. “It was that strong woman I fell in love with. It was that strong woman I wanted for my own.”

Her eyes widened. Yes, I was going all out. Fuck caution. Fuck what she was ready to hear. This was us. Our future. She was the other side of my coin. I was the other side of her sanity.

She swallowed, her eyes blinking. “You fell in love with me?”

I chuckled. “Kotyonok, I am so far past the love phase, it’s not even funny. You are my life. You are my breath. You are my everything. I waited seven years. I wanted you to come into your own before I pulled you into my madness. I can’t wait anymore.”

A shuddering breath passed her lips. “What if I need space? Time to think?”

I pulled her into my arms.

“Fuck space. Fuck time. You and me, Branka… we make sense. Together. I don’t want to waste another second on space and time.” I

pressed my mouth against hers and her body melted into me. “Think while you’re in my arms. Just don’t leave me.”

I let her see it all. All of me. The damaged, fucked up parts. The bits and pieces of decent parts.

Every-fucking-thing.

“I can’t have children,” she mentioned. Her tone was light. But her shoulders were tense. Her lips were pressed thin. “Another defective piece of me,” she sneered. “*An abnormality*, my doctor said. Excessive scar tissue or some bullshit like that.” A shuddering breath passed her lips. “I could never give you a family, Sasha.”

A heartbeat passed. My chest ached. My throat tightened. For her. If she wanted a baby, we’d find a way and have a baby.

“You sure?”

“Yes.” Her voice was a rough whisper. Our gazes held.

“Listen to me, Branka Russo,” I started. “I want *you*. *You*. Not what you can give me. I don’t give a shit about any of that other stuff.” Her fingers dug into her palms and I worried she didn’t believe me. “If you want a family one day, we’ll adopt. If you don’t want a family, it’ll be just you and I. Between your siblings and mine, we’ll have plenty of nephews and nieces to spoil.”

Her bottom lip trembled. “But–”

“There is no but,” I told her firmly. “You’re enough for me. You’re the one I waited for. You’re the one I am terrified of losing.”

“You are too much, Sasha,” she croaked. “What if you wake up tomorrow and realize you’ve made a mistake?”

The insecurities I felt in my heart and in my soul from the moment I heard my mother’s words uttered out loud, stared back at me. Maybe it was the reason Branka and I clicked. Two broken people but together we were whole.

“You are not a mistake. You are my passion. My obsession. Someone I can’t live without.” My heart thundered and blood buzzed in my ears. “Don’t ask me to live without you because that is the one thing I can’t give you. Your freedom.”

It fucking scared me that my love was unrequited, but I could no longer hold it inside me. I needed her in my life. An innocent encounter in the bar seven years ago changed me forever. She was the one that I’d been waiting on.

“It’s insanity,” she muttered. “Alessio will be mad. And I made a promise to Killian.”

I clenched my teeth. I could understand her loyalty to her brother but not to Killian. That one rubbed me the wrong way. But I knew I’d have to tread lightly with her.

“Forget your head, kotyonok. Forget your reason. This is for us. Just listen to your heart and then tell me whether you can picture us growing old together. Because I can. I love you, Branka Russo. All your perfections and imperfections are mine. Just like mine are all yours.”

She chewed on her bottom lip while I watched her. I could be patient when I wanted something. I have been patient with her because I *needed* her.

I had been in it for keeps all along.

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Chapter Fifty-Nine

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BRANKA

I should have known nothing with Sasha was half-assed.

After all, he seemed to know me better than I knew myself. My heart trembled with longing. My own happily ever after was a breath away.

"I love you too," I admitted softly, my heart thumping hard with the admission. It made me feel vulnerable and exposed. But also invincible when he looked at me with so many feelings in his eyes.

I'd have some apologizing to do to Killian. I should have never settled for him and gone through with it as far as I had. I told Killian there was a man I had fallen for who was history to me. Sasha was my past, present, and future.

He cupped my face with a palm, running a thumb across my cheeks. The intensity of his gaze made my throat tighten. This man was the only one I wanted to spend this life with.

His mouth crashed against mine. His arm around my waist pulled me hard against him, our heartbeats beating fast and eager.

"Don't ever fucking leave me, kotyonok," he murmured against my lips.

"Never," I croaked. "I'll never leave you."

We'd figure out our life together. Our future together. As long as we were together.

He grinned at my promise and both of his hands grabbed my ass, lifting me up into the air. My legs wrapped around his waist. He rested his forehead on mine, his citrusy scent cocooning me.

"Say you love me again," he demanded, his voice hoarse.

“I love you, Sasha Nikolaev.” A smile pulled on his lips and my heart fluttered in my chest, leaving me feeling raw.

He made a rough noise and picked me up as my legs wrapped around his waist. I rested my face against his neck, inhaling that citrusy scent. It would forever belong to him.

I had no idea how we made it back to our bedroom. I straddled him, my arms around his shoulders, my chest pressed to his and my mouth skimming his neck. Pulling his head toward me, I pressed my lips to his in a crushing kiss. His arms enveloped me, his tongue caressing mine. Sucking on it. Our hunger grew and we clawed at each other’s clothes.

Both of us were naked in the blink of an eye. I ran my hands along his naked muscles, my nails scraping his skin. I wanted him so bad, it was a constant ache in the pit of my stomach.

“No holding back,” he rumbled in a growl.

A feral look in his eyes burned like blue flames. He tossed me against the mattress, my body titling the mattress.

“Fuck, you have beautiful tits,” he rasped.

My eyes traveled over his naked body, most of it covered in ink. Beautiful and hard. Just like this man. His torso was magnificent, red roses with thorns weaved through a dagger. A cross. Nemesis. Phoenix. His body was a beautiful story.

He kneeled, the mattress shifting under her weight. Slowly, he covered my body with his. His eyes were locked on my face as he grabbed my wrists, clenching them together.

Pressing his face into my neck, he said, “I’m going to fuck you missionary.” *Oh my God.* He nipped my earlobe, skimming down my throat. “It’s your favorite position, isn’t it?”

“Yes,” I moaned.

“How many times have you fantasized about me fucking you missionary?” A deep blush colored my cheeks. Heat bloomed through my veins. “How many, kotyonok?”

I nodded.

“How many?”

“A million,” I breathed. “At least.”

His beautiful mouth tilted up.

“Then missionary it is.” His fingers glided up the inside of my thighs until he came to my entrance, smearing my wetness over my clit. A shudder

rolled over me. This need overwhelmed all my senses. My back arched off the bed, my hips grinding against him. His hard, silky cock brushed against my hot entrance with each arch of my hips.

Our gazes locked, then in one fierce thrust, he pierced me roughly, filling me to the hilt. Pain mixed with pleasure. A guttural cry filled the air. His free hand clamped over my mouth as he pulled out and thrust in again. This time even harder.

“Your pussy is so fucking tight. Taking me so good,” he praised.

The words filled every empty, lonely space in my body with hot satisfaction. His pelvis ground against mine, molten heat spread from my clit outward. I was heat and flames and pleasure.

I couldn’t stop touching him. My palms pressed on his sculpted muscles as he moved in and out of me, slow and forceful, slamming into me.

My thirst for him was unquenchable. I wanted him to fuck me harder, faster, deeper. He hit that magical spot inside me and I cried out. His hand came to the base of my throat, holding me firmly.

He fucked me like it was his only mission in life. Like his life depended on it. His control slipped with every thrust, slamming into me hard and relentless.

I writhed under him. I needed him. His control. His loss of it. His darkness. Everything. With a hand on my throat, he pounded into me. The pain and pleasure mixed.

He covered my mouth with his palm, while his other remained gripping my throat. It was rough. Restrictive. *And addictive.*

The orgasm was immediate and violent. It rolled through me like a tsunami. It chattered my teeth. Heat pulsed in my lower stomach and expanded like fireworks down to the tip of my toes.

I was flying so high that it wasn’t until I came down from my orgasm that I realized I’d bitten down on his hand. He was still inside me, watching me with that gaze of blue flames. He rested his forehead against mine, and he started to move again. Deep. So deep I could feel him in my stomach.

“Who fucks you?” he growled, punctuating the question with a violent thrust that tore another gasp from my throat.

“You,” I breathed. “Always you.”

Another orgasm followed. It hit me hard, shooting stars between my eyes and stealing breath from my lungs. My body seized up, tingles and

dazzles pulsing through my veins. A rumble of satisfaction came from his chest.

I clawed at his back as he grunted and slowed his thrusts. Our mouths fused, the kiss deep and passionate. His thrusts turned sensual and his hand left my throat, moving down until it reached my breast. He kneaded each breast while thrusting, in and out, his one arm wrapped around me, squeezing me tight.

Another thrust and I felt him jerk as he spilled inside me.

We stayed like that, his mouth an inch from mine. Our breaths mixed together. Our hearts beat as one.

With a rough noise, he pulled out of me and covered my body like a blanket. With my hands still wrapped around him, I placed a kiss on his neck, soaking up his smell. I kissed his jawline, his lips, then his eyes, then back to his lips.

“My kotyonok.” Two rough words murmured against my lips. “My love.” He traced a finger across my cheek as blush stained my cheeks. “You even try and retract your love and I’ll tie you to my bed, feed you, and fuck you until you change your mind,” he warned in a low growl.

I knew he meant it. But he didn’t know that I’d never retract it.

A chuckle escaped me. “Such romantic words from a psycho killer.”

He grinned. A carefree, happy smile and it stole my breath away. “Only the best for my kotyonok. My queen.”

Happiness bounced off the walls of my chest. My blood sang and my heart glowed with so much love, I feared we’d blind the planet.

“It’s only fair I return the favor,” I murmured, snuggling deep into him. “I see you with another woman, and I’ll cut her heart out while you watch. And then I’ll cut out yours.”

His big hand roamed my bare back in a soothing motion, comforting and warm. “That’s a fair warning. Especially after receiving your bloody message and the heart wrapped in a bow.” My chest shook from laughter and I lifted my head to meet his eyes. He believed I killed his friend. Jesus, did I give off the same psycho vibes as this man? “Next time, let’s talk before we kill someone. He was a good guy.”

By this point my entire body shook and laughter rang through the room. “I didn’t kill him,” I chuckled. “That was a pig’s heart.”

Surprise entered his expression. He blinked, then the corner of his lips tugged up. “My sensitive little killer,” he murmured and pressed his mouth

to my forehead. “I honestly can’t remember when the last time someone pulled one over on me was.”

I grinned, then lowered my head against his chest and listened to his strong heartbeat.

“Let it be known I was the first.”

“You, kotyonok, were my first in a lot of things,” I thought I heard him say but sleep pulled me under too soon to be sure.

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Chapter Sixty

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SASHA

She was out like a light.

I smoothed a stray strand of Branka’s hair off her face.

She was hugging my chest, the soft curves of her body pressed against me. Her ass was bare and marked by me. I fucking love seeing my marks on her. She was all mine. She chose this, me, willingly.

A contented sigh spilled from her lips and she pushed into my touch.

It was strange how ghosts that kept hold of me for decades have lost their power overnight. With Branka, I felt like I belonged. She was the first woman to speak to my soul and became an indispensable part of me.

She made me so fucking proud. And so happy. My perfect match. My little tigress. Taming her has been the biggest challenge. She didn’t bend to my will but she was the only woman fit to be my other half. My queen.

She might be submissive under my touch, but outside the bedroom she was her own woman. One day, she’d rip the world a new one.

But before that, I’d have to call her brother. I glanced at the clock. I guess there's no time like the present. I’d never be the one to avoid problems but Alessio was one problem I’d like to avoid. Killian… well, if he pissed me off, I’d just shoot him. I couldn’t apply the same rule to Branka’s brother because she loved him.

Goddamn it. The irrational part of me wanted all her love. I was selfish when it came to Branka Russo and the feeling wasn’t easing. In fact, it grew with each second around her.

I reached for my phone, resting on the nightstand. I had another one for Branka, set up and ready to go, buried in the drawer. I was surprised she

didn’t find it, but then we kept each other busy in our bedroom.

Getting out of bed, careful not to wake her up, I pulled my pants on and headed to the adjoining room that was sometimes used as an office. I dialed up Alessio and waited, each ringtone pulling on the tension in my shoulders.

“You Russian motherfucker,” was the greeting I got from my future brother-in-law. “When I get my hands on you, I’m going to wring your neck and watch life leave your eyes.”

“I didn’t realize you loved me so much,” I retorted dryly.

“I hate your fucking guts,” he hissed. “My wife told me everything.”

“I doubt it was *everything*,” I pointed out in a bored tone. “She wouldn’t share our history with you.”

Okay, egging on my brother-in-law wasn’t smart, but then I never claimed to be.

“You have no history with my wife. And yes, she told me how you came to collect your debt.”

It turned out Autumn had an honest relationship with her husband. Thank fuck she held off on sharing that information until I already had Branka in my clutches. Otherwise, Alessio would have surrounded her with men I would have had to kill.

“That’s in the past,” I told him calmly. “Now, let’s talk about our future.”

“Are you fucking mental?” Okay, my brother-in-law had a temper when it came to his family. Duly noted. “There is no ‘*our’* future. If you don’t deliver my sister to me safe and sound, you won’t have any future except six feet under.”

I heard a soft female voice and recognized it as his wife’s. She was probably trying to calm him down. Smart woman! The best case scenario would be we kill each other, but more likely, I killed him and made her a widow. Of course, my kotyonok would never forgive me for that.

“Branka and I want to talk to you,” I continued like he hadn’t just threatened me. “The two of us will marry.”

“She’s marrying Killian.”

“She will never marry that fucker.” My tone was calm, but internally, I was a second away from reaching through the fucking phone and killing him. I’d have to talk to Branka about leeway with her brother. I should at least be able to injure him.

“It. Is. Not. Up. To. You.” He growled. “Are you fucking stupid or is forcing yourself on women your kink?”

I clenched my teeth, my jaw hurting from the force of it. Fuck, I might have even cracked a molar. Then his words registered and a thought snuck into my mind.

Got you fucker!

“You want her to choose, right?” I asked her brother.

“Yes,” he gritted. “I want her to be happy. She deserves that.”

I grinned. “Agreed. Now let’s meet.”

“I’m in Russia,” he grumbled. “Give me the time and place.”

Sneaky motherfucker. I should have known he wasn’t sitting at home. He was as relentless as the rest of us when we hunted.

“Only if you bring your lovely wife and son,” I deadpanned, certain I was pissing him off even more.

“Don’t push my buttons,” he said, his voice cold.

“Pushing your buttons would be me kidnapping your wife and son so Branka wouldn’t feel lonely,” I told him calmly. “I’m giving you an option to bring them. If you refuse, I will kidnap them.”

“Why?” he questioned.

I chuckled. “Branka is missing them so let them talk, while you and I talk.”

Silence followed. “You’re bringing her along?”

My lips curved up. I certainly wouldn’t leave her behind.

“Yes.”

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Chapter Sixty-One

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BRANKA

Sasha sat behind the desk, his feet propped up on it. His eyes met mine and a smug smile curved his lips. It was the kind of smile that promised naughty things. Instantly butterflies fluttered their wings wildly in my stomach. This man was making an insatiable sex addict out of me.

Earlier today he informed me we'd see my brother, Autumn and Kol. So for that alone, I'd allow him all smugness and smirking. I was so excited to see my family and hug them all.

"What?" I asked suspiciously.

"I have a surprise for you," he announced with a wide smile. But his eyes weren't smiling. They were light blue pools, pulling me into their depths.

He looked over my shoulder and I followed his gaze. A tall man with a scar marking his face stood there, his arms folded. I'd never seen him before. I returned my eyes to Sasha.

"If you even dare to suggest a threesome, I'm going to murder you," I said calmly. I was coming to a revelation that I didn't mind Sasha's kinky stuff. Not at all. But I wouldn't be fucked by two men.

"I'm not the sharing type," Sasha said, his voice almost a growl as if the mere idea of another man touching me had him raging. "Nobody touches what's mine and you're mine."

His words sent a wave of warmth through me. Gosh, it was so easy for me to fall madly in love with him. I was so head over heels with him.

Love!

I never thought I'd have it and here it was, in my grasp. The only reference to love and happiness I had was my best friend's parents. And the love my brother and Autumn shared.

This thing with Sasha was different. It wasn't sweet. It was almost violent and all-consuming. I couldn't imagine living a lifetime without him.

Now, if only I could make Alessio and Killian understand. The latter wouldn't be heartbroken, but I worried about my brother.

I followed Sasha's gaze over my shoulder. A terse nod and the guy disappeared.

"Come here."

My feet already moved, obeying him when my brain finally caught up and had my steps faltering. I didn't know what it was about him that had me obeying him. My body trusted him unconditionally and so did my heart.

Well, I hadn't earned his either.

"Kotyonok, come here," he demanded again, the expression on his face telling me disobedience would be a bad idea.

My heels clicked on the hardwood as I came around the desk toward him. The moment I was within his reach, he gripped my waist and lifted me onto his desk. Trepidation and excitement charged through my veins. It was always the same with Sasha. The way he touched me, like he already owned me, had my body mold into him.

His big hand came to my breasts, and he pressed me down until I'm spread flat across the desk, my knees bending over the side. My heels drop off my feet, one at a time, and hit the floor with a loud thump.

"What are you doing?" I asked, peering up at him.

A wolfish grin spread across his face then he crouched between my legs. He lifted my dress, then latched something soft around my ankle. My head shot up as I watched him locking both my ankles to the legs of the desk, leaving my legs spread wide open.

"What the hell are you doing?"

Those pale blue eyes met mine. "Want me to gag you too?"

My eyes widened. What the—

I jerked against the bonds when his hand came to my thighs, keeping them firmly in place.

"Do you trust me?"

I stilled, drowning in his Arctic crystal blues. Explicit trust was such a hard thing for me. It'd be a work in progress for the rest of my life.

I jerked against the bonds, but they were unyielding. My skin tingled, the scars that have been erased somehow aching.

“Don’t.” My movements halted at his command. My eyes darted to him, my heart thundering against my ribs. “Breathe.” I swallowed. “Breathe for me.”

I took a lungful of oxygen and inhaled, then slowly exhaled. Then repeated.

“Good girl,” he praised. “You can follow orders. And for that, I won’t cuff your hands.”

His thumbs brushed my skin, searing it. He started at my ankles, and slid up the inside of my legs until they reached my thighs. He pushed my skirt up, inch by inch, until my thong was in full view.

“You put on what I laid out for you,” he purred, satisfaction coloring his voice. Red had to be Sasha’s favorite color for me. The dress he laid out for me was bold red. Not terribly revealing, but very sensual.

Slickness gathered between my legs and the reaction confused the hell out of me. Regularly just the thought of being tied up sent me into a panic attack. Yet with this man, bondage seemed to turn me on more than anything. I was clearly more insane than I thought.

Sasha’s palms stopped right at my entrance, his thumb poised over my clit. He swiped his thumb down the material of the soaked material of my thong.

“You’re wet for me,” he remarked calmly. “You like being at my mercy.”

“I don’t,” I breathed out but we both knew I was lying.

He slapped my pussy and a yelp vibrated through the air. “Don’t lie,” he growled. Then he slapped it again and to my horror more juices soaked through my thong. “Now, tell me the truth.”

“I-I…” The lie refused to pass my lips. “I like it,” I admitted softly. “But I shouldn’t.”

He rewarded me with a smile and his palm rubbing my pussy. “As long as you enjoy it, anything goes.” My thighs attempted to clench together, but the bonds kept my ankles locked. “Should I finger you, eat your sweet pussy, or fuck you?”

He stared at me pensively as if he was seriously debating it. “Or I could do all three.”

My muscles flexed and I almost came just from his words. He grinned, not missing my clenching pussy. “My kotyonok is a dirty girl.”

“Please.” The plea came out on a wavering breath. His answer was using his other hand to tear the thong off me, the lace shredding effortlessly under his strength.

“I can’t wait to bury my cock in your mouth,” he rasped, his hand rubbing my pussy.

A shudder rolled over my body as he bent his head and dragged his nose along my inner thigh. He inhaled my scent, breathing in my arousal then closed his mouth over my center and began to devour me.

He teased my entrance with a finger, and my back arched off the desk. He pushed his finger inside my entrance, the juices dripping down my inner thighs and drenching his fingers. Then his mouth came to my clit and he sucked hard as he pushed his finger deep inside me.

Stars exploded behind my eyelids and waves of pleasure rocked through my body. My hands reached for his head, my fingers burying themselves in his hair and gripping a handful like it was my life raft. My pussy grinding against his face, he kept eating me out, not wasting a single drop.

“Taste yourself. You liked it before,” he growled against my oversensitive pussy. Panting for air, I didn’t answer him and he nipped my clit and another shudder rolled down my body. “Do you want to know what you taste like?”

I peeled my eyelids open, meeting his gaze watching me while buried between my legs.

“What do I taste like?”

“Like my wife.”

Wait. What?

Then with a final long lick of his tongue, he rose to his feet. He went around the desk and reached for my wrists.

“We’re not done here yet,” he said, his mouth glistening with my juices. He didn’t even bother wiping it off. “Are you okay if I cuff your wrist?”

When I nodded without delay, I knew deep down, I was all in with Sasha Nikolaev.

He wrapped my wrists in cushion-lined leather cuffs connected by an intricate chain. My heart still thundered from the orgasm I experienced as Sasha pushed my spine back down to the surface of the desk and guided my bound hands over my head, clipping them to a hook somewhere below.

He watched my body sprawled out on his desk, like a sacrificial lamb waiting to be feasted on. But only by him. I'd only be devoured by him.

"Now I'm going to eat your cunt in peace," he drawled.

"But-"

A deep, dark chuckle vibrated from his chest. "What? You thought we were done?"

I nodded.

"We are far from done here, kotyonok."

He crouched between my legs again, circling my clit with one thick fingertip, I writhed, bucking my hips up to increase the pressure. Sasha sucked my sensitive clit between his teeth, biting down just hard enough to send a jolt of shocking desire and pain through every cell of my body. He tongued my entrance before licking up to my clit and nipping it again. A moan traveled through the air, my head thrashing from side to side.

"Please, please," I begged. He thrust his tongue inside my entrance, mimicking how his cock would slide in and out of me. Pressure built and built, I was so close when he stopped.

"No," I protested whiny, my body flushing with frustration. If he started to bring me to the edge only to leave me hanging, I'd lose my mind.

He reached around the side of the desk and pulled out a package. I lifted my head as much as I could with my arms in their bound position to see what he's doing. He opened the package and a flash of silver entered my vision.

"What was that?" I questioned.

"You'll like it," he assured convincingly. Cold metal dragged across my heated center, and an involuntary shiver rolled through my body.

He closed it lightly over my swollen clit, sending my spine arching off the desk again. As quickly as the pressure came, it dissipated too.

I wanted more of whatever that was.

"You like it, don't you," he stated.

"Yes." My voice was hoarse from the orgasms, my breathing labored.

Pulling on the clamp, he stood and the pressure returned, pushing me toward an orgasm. He let off before I reached the peak.

"Damn you." I let out a frustrated breath.

Another chuckle. "It's time for your surprise."

"Is it an orgasm?" I panted out, heat swimming through my veins. I was mindless with need, so close to the edge that I just needed to grind myself

against him and I’d reach my pleasure.

“Please—”

“You want to come again?”

“Yes!”

“Then we’ll pierce that sweet little hood so the jewelry rubs your clit every time you move.”

His words penetrated my lust-filled brain, the meaning of it sinking in. I blinked, staring at him and hoping I misunderstood what he just said.

“Excuse me?”

“A piercing. On your pussy.” I blinked, then blinked again. My brain must have slowed due to the orgasms. “It’ll heighten your every sensation. I want you ready for me, wet and soaking at all times.”

I shook my head, but not in denial. It was more in disbelief. From a virgin to a hood piercing in the matter of a week. Was I crazy to even entertain it? Excitement shot through me at the thought of doing something so naughty. This psychotic mobster was corrupting me. Or maybe I was corrupted from the moment I was born.

He must read the agreement on my face. “We’re getting it pierced today.”

My mouth dropped in shock. “Today?” I repeated stupidly.

He grinned. “Yes, today.” His eyes lowered to my spread thighs. My pussy wide open for him to see and something hot flared in his gaze. “Tell me you want it.”

I did want it, but it felt like I kept giving in to him, while all he gave me was orgasms. Those were wonderful and all but it wasn’t enough.

His tongue circled my clit, teasing and testing before nipping and tugging. My hips pressed up against his mouth, increasing the pressure, but he backed off again. “Tell me you want it,” he repeated.

His finger lazily circled my entrance, pushing in and out. My body demanded another wave of pleasure but I held back.

“I’ll do it.” Victory flashed in his eyes. “But only if you tell me the story behind another one of your tattoos.”

My pussy ground against his hand even as those words came out. He stiffened.

“Why?”

Because I want to know you. I want to know all your layers, not just the mask you wear around the others.

“Autumn’s parents always said it’s a two way street to make things work,” I muttered. “And they’re happy.”

He resumed circling my entrance lazily. “Are you happy?”

The question was casual. The expression on his face almost appeared like he couldn’t give a fuck whether I was happy or not. But my instinct warned otherwise. Maybe Sasha was just as scared of being hurt as I was.

“I’m not unhappy,” I answered.

“But you’re not happy.”

I remained silent, watching him. “I want more than just sex, Sasha.” The words escaped me and there was no taking them back. Not that I wanted to take them back but they made me feel vulnerable and raw. “You gave me words, but I want more.” I want to know his scars. His fears. Everything. And then I wanted to be the one to chase it all away from him. “I have my own fears. Being left behind. Not being good enough.” I took a deep breath, then exhaled. “You’re holding back.”

Silence followed. Trepid heartbeats drummed.

“I want to see my brother. Talk to my nephew and my best friend. I miss them.”

My heart stilled, waiting with a desperate hum. A heaviness tugged at my chest, his eyes full with ghosts of our pasts.

“Are you regretting your words, kotyonok?”

‘Never,” I told him passionately. “I’m here to stay. But I need more. You can’t even tell me the full stories behind your tattoos, Sasha. How are we going to survive years together if you can’t even share that with me?”

He ran a hand across his jaw. My throat felt tight, expecting him to dismiss me or tell me I wasn’t worth it.

“Which tattoo?” he said.

Confusion flickered through me and my eyes flared to him in question.

“Excuse me?”

“Which tattoo do you want to know about?” he asked.

My eyes flickered to where the Nemesis tattoo hid under his clothing, then to his knuckles. His gaze followed mine. The vulnerability that flashed in his eyes was a punch in my gut and I almost told him never mind. But I didn’t.

“My mother hated me,” he started. “She hated and loved my father. But me… she couldn’t stand me.”

My brows furrowed. “Why?”

“She blamed me for her failed marriage,” he rasped. “The day she died, I found her in the hallway muttering like a lunatic.” He let out a bitter laugh. “Her parting words before she killed herself, she made a point of telling me I was unworthy. That nobody would ever love me. And then she flung herself out the window.”

The vehemence and vulnerability in his voice made my chest ache. My throat felt tight - for the little boy to have endured something like that. Yes, my mother attempted to commit suicide and take us with her but I didn’t remember it. I was an infant. It scared Alessio and Mia more than me. There were other ghosts haunting me.

“You are worthy,” I choked out. “And any woman would be lucky to have you. But you are mine now and I am yours. I will never leave you.” I wrapped my hands around him, at a loss for more words. So I said the only other thing I could. “Let’s get a hood piercing.”

His chest vibrated and the tightness in my chest slowly eased.

“And I will never leave you behind, kotyonok. It’s me and you. Forever.” I leaned closer to him and sighed into his mouth when he kissed me.

“Forever,” I repeated, my lips brushing against his. “Now where is the piercing guy?”

He pulled his phone from his pocket and typed up a message, then the sound of it leaving his phone filled the space.

The reply was instant.

“She’s coming now.”

“She?”

Sasha grinned. “You didn’t think I’d allow a man to touch you there. I’d have to slice off his hands and blind him.”

I shook my head but a smile pulled on my lips.

“What if it ruins my hoo-ha?” I asked out of nowhere. “I just started having sex. I’m going to need it for a long time.”

His features relaxed, then went blank, before he exploded with laughter. He lowered to a crouch and reached for the buckle on my ankles releasing me.

“I promise, I’ll keep your hoo-ha safe,” he vowed.

Several heartbeats passed before I admitted, “I’m actually a tiny bit excited. Hopefully, it won’t hurt too bad. I want to have more sex.”

Amusement crossed his expression and he huffed out a chuckle as he unbuckled my wrists.

“We’ll have sex,” he assured. I closed my legs, but it took no time for Sasha to come stand in front of me. His hands came to the outside of both my thighs and he wrapped my legs around his waist. It wasn’t sexual. It was as if he wanted me close, just as I wanted him close.

“I can’t wait to see you pierced,” he murmured, his mouth skimming over my neck.

He was pushing me outside my comfort zone, and I liked it.

“Maybe we will get you pierced too,” I suggested in a throaty voice. “I hear it’s quite the experience for the woman.”

Suddenly his hand gripped the nape of my head. “Who told you that?”

Geez, he was possessive. “Women talk,” I murmured.

He visibly relaxed. “If you want me to get pierced, I will. But I assure you, kotyonok, you don’t have to worry about your pleasure. You’ll get it with or without the piercing.”

A knock at the door sounded interrupting our discussion. “Enter,” Sasha called out.

The door opened and the guy with the scar walked in with a small woman behind him.

“This should be fun,” the guy with the scar announced, grinning. His eyes traveled over me, creepy and leering.

“You won’t stay in the room, Albert,” Sasha barked out, his expression hard as granite. The guy looked from me to him, back to me, his posture stiffening.

It was the petite woman who broke the intense silence. “I got it from here,” she announced firmly. “I’m here for her.” Her chin tilted my way. “Once I’m finished with the job, just have a car for me outside and I’ll be on my way.”

Sasha’s cold eyes were still locked on Albert, promising pain and retribution. I reached out a hand and caught his arm, wrapping my fingers around his large bicep.

“He’s leaving,” I told him, conveying with my eyes for Albert to beat it. Sasha’s gaze dropped to where my hand lay on him, then returned his eyes to me with a new intensity.

Albert disappeared the same moment and I released my hold on Sasha’s arm. He flexed his fingers before balling them into fists, then uncurling

them to shove them into the pockets of his suit pants.

The petite woman stood in her spot, tension visible in her shoulders.

“It’s okay,” I told her. “We’re ready.”

As if she didn’t believe me, her eyes flickered to Sasha. He gave a terse nod.

“I’m Natasha,” she introduced herself as she took tentative steps towards us.

“Branka,” I told her, smiling. “This is my– “ I didn’t know what to call him. My boyfriend? It didn’t sound right. “This is Sasha,” I finally finished saying.

She nodded. “Okay, let’s do this.”

“Your English is really good,” I commended her.

She chuckled, laying out a toolbox onto the table. “I sure hope so. I was born in the States.”

“Small world,” I muttered.

“The smallest.”

She had me lying back on the desk and I opened my legs, while Sasha stayed by my side, holding my hand. Natasha worked efficiently to sanitize me, prepared my hoo-ha and then reached for the long needle with a diamond on it.

My eyes flickered to Sasha. “A diamond?”

He grinned. “I picked it out. It reminds me of your eyes.”

Returning my gaze to the long, thick needle, trepidation fluttered through me. Maybe this wasn’t such a good idea. Sasha must have read the second guessing in my expression, because his hand squeezed mine in comfort.

“Take a few deep breaths,” he instructed. “In and out.”

I rolled my eyes. “That sounds an awful lot like labor.” Then a thought struck me and I shifted to see him better. “Have you done this before with a woman?”

The jealousy lacing my voice hadn’t gone unnoticed. He smiled.

“This is my first,” he admitted. “So many firsts already for us.”

I slightly relaxed at his assurance, my anxious look returning to the needle. That was one big-ass needle.

“It’s not nearly as bad as what you’re imagining. I promise,” she assured.

Famous last words, I thought wryly to myself.

I took a deep breath in and breathed out as instructed.

“Deep breath in,” she ordered, and my hand clamped around Sasha’s fingers as I complied. “Now, blow it out.”

The sting was gone before the oxygen left my lungs.

“All done,” Natasha beamed. “Congratulations.”

I shook my head incredulously. That was it. I barely felt it. “Are you sure you did it?” I asked.

She nodded, smiling. “Let me tighten the jewelry and you’re good to go.”

A few more moments later, she was all done. She stood up, snapping off her latex gloves, and strode to the bathroom connected to the office. She washed her hands and she was on her way out.

When the door closed, I met Sasha’s gaze.

“Why a piercing down there?” I questioned.

“On your pussy?” he challenged, being crude on purpose. With his mouth, my cheeks would be permanently stained by the time I died. “I love marking you.”

I rolled my eyes. “Nobody will see it.”

His lips tugged up. “But you and I will know it’s there. You will know you’re mine and if I die, you’ll think of me every time that thing brushes against your flesh.”

The thought of him dying squeezed my chest and my fingers curled into his shirt, pulling him closer.

“You won’t die,” I told him.

Alessio would see tomorrow that my life without Sasha wasn’t worth living. At least not for me.

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Chapter Sixty-Two

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BRANKA

Sasha slid my feet into a pair of white sandals and a red dress with white polka dots.

"You seriously have an obsession with red," I muttered as I let him dress me.

"Red is the color of my heart," he murmured. "And it beats only for you. When you wear red, I know you're mine."

I sat in the car, rain dripping down the car window, while I watched Sasha argue with his family. They all insisted on coming. Sasha refused to bring them along.

Once outside, we trekked to the car, avoiding the raindrops but not before we were cornered by the Nikolaev family.

"Yeah, you're not leaving without us," Tatiana announced. "You're family and family sticks together."

I smiled at her conviction. One should never have favorites, but Tatiana was my favorite member of the Nikolaev family. She reminded me a bit of Sasha, just a female version.

"My brother is family too," I told her softly. "Everything will go fine. Just a small visit and then we'll be back."

The look she gave me told me she didn't believe that.

Sasha helped me into the passenger seat, then shut the door, before turning back to his family. All of them stood in the rain, unconcerned with the weather while arguing. Their muffled voices could be heard through the rain hitting the roof of the car and the closed window.

“You are fucking crazy if you think I’m letting you go alone,” Vasili growled.

“We should all go,” Aurora insisted. “So they can see we are family.”

By the looks on the Nikolaevs' faces the women and children could stay behind. I agreed. There was no sense in causing more havoc than necessary.

“If we all go, Alessio will take it as a sign of us against them,” Sasha grumbled. “I don’t need you all tagging along. This is not a duck formation.”

I shook my head at the funny comparison. Conflicting feelings battled in my chest. Excitement to see my brother, Autumn and my nephew, worry that shit would hit the fan and someone would get hurt and fear that Sasha would walk away from me, leaving me in the shadows again.

It made no sense but I couldn’t help the ridiculous notions.

“Alexei and I are coming,” Vasili said in his final tone. “Whether we drive together or not it’s up to you.”

Sasha must have caved in because he came to my door and opened it. “Kotyonok, let’s get in the back.”

I climbed out of the front passenger seat and got in the back, Sasha sliding in right behind me. Alexei and Vasili kissed their wives goodbye, checked their holsters and then got into the front seats. Alexei got behind the wheel and put the car into drive.

My hands clutched in my lap, watching the scenery pass by. With each mile behind us, my apprehension grew. I feared losing my brother. I feared losing Sasha even more.

Alessio will hear me out, I assured myself.

And still my blood grew colder. I trusted my brother with my life, just not Sasha’s or his brothers’. We drove for miles, the tension palpable. The brothers exchanged a few words, speaking in Russian. Of course, I understood none of it.

I imagined they were strategizing how to come to peaceful terms with my brother. A sardonic breath left me. It would be so much easier if Alessio and I didn’t love each other, but I did. He was everything to me - my mother, father, brother, sister. I didn’t want to give him up.

Taking a sharp turn, we came to a large empty parking lot. My eyes roamed over it and I spotted a black SUV parked on the far side of the area, right in front of what looked like an abandoned building.

Spotting us, the door to the SUV opened and Alessio stepped out of it. My heart drummed under my rib cage. My brother was here.

Sasha opened the door and stepped out, then held the door, gesturing for me to follow. I followed without saying a word. Vasili and Alexei were already out of the car, their weapons visible. The doors slammed shut behind me.

“Branka,” Alessio called out to me, worry etched on his face. His left hand extended my way, reaching for me. Conflict battled within me, pulling me in two different directions.

I took a step towards my brother, but my step faltered. An almost imperceptible tension radiated from Sasha and I turned to look at him. The pale blues of his orbs turned darker, full of things that had me glued to the spot. I drowned in his gaze, aware my brother waited.

I swallowed, then pulled my gaze to my brother. My hand reached for Sasha’s and our fingers interlocked.

“The heart beating inside my chest,” he said, his voice like gravel and full of emotions, “it’s yours. It’s been yours for a long time.”

Lowering my gaze, I watched his inked fingers against my pale skin and I knew, deep down, Sasha was my choice. He’d always be my choice. I raised my head and his eyes met mine, holding me steady.

“You’re all I want,” I choked out, emotions swelling in my chest, and the expression on his face told me it was the right choice. I loved my brother, but if it came down to Sasha or my brother, as much as I hated to choose, I’d always choose Sasha.

Hand in hand, we turned our attention back to my brother. One step. Two steps. Three steps. All the while Alessio watched us with a grim expression, but with every step we got closer to him, understanding entered his eyes.

Although he didn’t seem happy about his revelation.

We stopped ten feet from my brother, Sasha’s brothers right at our back.

“Jesus, Branka,” he muttered. “Of all the men, this one?”

Autumn climbed out of the SUV, shoving Alessio to the side so she could see me. “I told you,” she grumbled, holding on to her belly and wobbling to come stand next to him. “They have a thing going.”

A smile touched my lips when Alessio pushed his hand through his hair. At this rate, my poor brother would be gray in another few years.

“She has a thing going with Killian,” Alessio reasoned stubbornly.

“Obviously not,” Vasili deadpanned.

My brother’s eyes drifted to me. “What about Killian? He was your choice.”

I swallowed the lump in my throat. “He was the one I picked out of the presented choices,” I croaked out. “I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have let it get as far as it did.”

“Jesus, Branka. You were just a few steps away from the altar.”

Guilt swelled in my chest. “I’ll explain to Killian,” I told my brother. “It’s my fuck up and I’ll fix it.”

He shook his head. “The only way to fix it is to marry him, Sis.”

A low growl vibrated through the air. Sasha’s. “Her choice,” he growled. “You said it yourself. Are you going back on your word?”

Alessio let out a deep breath, his eyes on me and ignoring Sasha who remained close to me.

“Is he your choice, Branka?” Alessio’s question was low, his eyes dark stormy clouds.

“Yes, Brother,” I murmured. “He is.”

The rain dripped softly, soaking into the blacktop and leaving spots on my dress. The weather was gloomy but my heart danced, because the man I loved was right next to me.

“Why is nobody telling me shit?” Alessio grumbled, then narrowed his eyes on Sasha. “You’re not my choice for her.”

“But he’s mine,” I pointed out.

One moment tension danced through the air and the next a sound of a squeal broke through the air. Kol jumped out of the car and ran straight towards me. Letting go of Sasha’s hand, I lowered to my knees and opened my arms for him.

“Aunt Branka.” He threw himself into my arms and I caught him. “I missed you. I thought you left me for good.”

My throat squeezed. I knew firsthand the fear of being left behind, and I’d never wanted my nephew to feel like that.

“I’m never going to leave you,” I promised. “I might not see you every day, but I’ll always be here for you, buddy. For you and your baby sister.”

Kol rolled his eyes. “Grandma said babies cry a lot.” A chuckle sounded around us. “If she cries too much, can I just come live with you?”

“You’d leave your mom and me?” Alessio questioned. “That’s going to break our hearts.”

Kol immediately shook his head.

“Only for a little bit. Until the baby stops crying.” The rain paused and the first glimmer of sun flickered between the clouds. Kol ran over to hug his parents. “I still love you the most.”

Another round of chuckles sounded. It was that easy for a kid to break the tension.

I rose to my full height, Sasha hovering over me. Alessio’s shoulders were relaxed but he still glared at him.

“You’re too fucking crazy for my baby sister.”

Sasha chuckled. “And you’re too fucking boring.”

I stood with Sasha and the Nikolaev brothers, watching my own family. The people that meant the world to me and had always been there for me.

A flicker of light had me shifting my eyes away from my family to the roof of the old building. My heart froze in my chest. The silver glint of a rifle reflected against the rays of sun. It was pointed at Sasha.

I didn’t think. I reacted just as a *pop* sounded.

My body recoiled forward towards him. Pain exploded through me and my breathing was cut short. Screams and shouts filled the air, but they were all distant, the buzzing in my ears drowning it all.

My eyes found Sasha’s face and our gazes met. It was then that fear and terror which marred his expression crept into my soul. My body started falling. My bones trembled and began to shake my entire body. My vision blurred.

“*Blyad*, kotyonok,” he exhaled roughly as his inked hands caught my body. But I couldn’t feel his touch. “Why in the fuck did you do that?”

I wasn’t sure whether his voice shook or my body trembled so bad that it impacted my hearing.

Alessio, Vasili, and Alexei shouted in the background but I couldn’t distinguish a single word.

“Don’t you fucking leave me,” he demanded, his tone rough and shadows in his eyes dark. “Please hang on. For me,” he begged, desperately. Then he grabbed my face. “Keep your eyes open. Stay for me.”

Always.

Except, I wasn’t sure if I said those words. His lips still moved, but I couldn’t hear them.

The world stopped turning. The breeze stilled. Time froze.

Then everything went dark.

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Chapter Sixty-Three

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SASHA

Beep. Beep. Beep.

The steady beeps of the machine was the only thing that kept me sane.

Branka had been out for two days. Each second stretched like a lifetime. I didn't know how much longer I'd last. I was slowly losing my mind. If I lost her, I knew all bets would be off. I wouldn't survive. Without her, there was no life for me. I'd follow her in death.

Alessio wanted to take her back to Canada. I forbade it. It was too risky. After Branka lost consciousness, an explosion shook the entire parking lot. Maxim had been planning this shit all along. I was a fucking idiot to ever rely on him.

We fell right into his hands. An eye for an eye.

The fucker held a grudge against Branka and me for seven fucking years. He let it fester for a long time. And I was oblivious to it all because I'd lowered my guard. It was all my fault.

"It's not your fault," Alexei said, his voice raspy. His hand came to my shoulder, then squeezed in comfort. That alone was enough to send me into a panic. I could count on one hand how many times Alexei touched a human being. His wife excluded.

Except, it was my fault. I was so far up my own ass that I missed Maxim's signs. He blamed me for his woman's death. He didn't have a stomach to kill Branka so I was the next best thing.

While I held Branka, begging her to hang on to the promises of our life together, Alessio and Vasili went after him. It took them ten minutes to

locate him. He was still hassling with the sniper gun, figuring out how to disassemble it. I guess he didn't think it through past that point. He cried like a baby. It was for naught. They emptied a round of bullets into Maxim's skull to ensure there was no risk of him coming back.

And all the while, I was lost. Useless. I couldn't move, gripping Branka's body in my arms. Alexei had my back and kept Alessio's family secured.

The drive to the hospital was a fucking blur. All I remember was Branka's blood. Too much of it. But it was her deathly pale face that tore at my chest.

"You should go and change," Vasili attempted. I hadn't left her side, gripping her hand in mine. Even during the surgery, I refused to leave her side. It would have never worked in the States but here in Russia, all I had to do was point my gun at them and throw them some money.

Neither Alessio nor Vasili were happy about that. Well, fuck them.

It wasn't their woman bleeding in their arms. It was mine.

"Why isn't she awake?" I rasped, my voice hoarse. I hadn't spoken a word today. "She should be awake by now."

"We should have flown her back to Canada," Alessio hissed. "They have better doctor's there."

"The doctors here are just fine," I barked. "One of the best in the world. And Isabella was part of the team working on Branka."

Of course, I had to point a gun at the nurse and throw a few million dollars at the head surgeon and the hospital. It was well worth it because there was nobody I trusted more than my sister-in-law. After all, she patched me up a few times as well.

"Are you fucking with me?" Alessio roared. "This building looks like it's a leftover from World War II."

"Well, Isabella is not part of World War II," I remarked tiredly.

Branka's brother looked like a wreck too. But that didn't fucking concern me. Only his sister. I needed her. I didn't need him.

"Jesus Christ, I can't deal with you as my brother-in-law," Alessio growled. "It's just too fucking much. This shithole is falling apart."

"I didn't know you were big on fancy architecture," I spat out.

"You know what I'm not big on?" he snapped back. "On you with my sister. She's in that hospital bed because of you."

The guilt slashed through me. He was right. I failed her. I should have protected her.

"Both of you stop it," Autumn demanded, her voice a soft hiss. "Branka is alive, and the last thing she'd want is you bickering like two old ladies."

"I'll drink to that," Tatiana announced. Jesus, couldn't I demand they all be kicked out. They wanted to be here for me, but I just needed quiet so I could listen to the beeping machine and watch Branka's chest rise and fall. It was my confirmation that she was alive.

Beep. Beep. Beep.

Five fucking days of beeping!

Maybe I should start killing the fuckers who worked here. Clearly they were useless. I was losing my mind.

The steady beeps that offered comfort, now had me despairing.

My family and Branka's brother stayed clear of me. Supposedly, I was getting on their nerves. I wondered what the fuck they thought they were doing to me.

After endless nagging, I finally took a shower. Apparently I smelled like a rotten corpse. My sister's words, not mine. While I took a quick shower, Tatiana and Autumn sat by Branka's side. Autumn kept crying, which had me on edge. Tatiana kept muttering that if one more person dies on her, she'd become a full-time alcoholic. I wasn't sure if it was her threat to the world or her negotiation with God.

I didn't care, as long as it worked. There wasn't much I needed in life, but I needed Branka. I was dependent on her.

Once done with the shower, I resumed my spot and the two lingered in the hallway along with our families. I watched them murmuring to each other, probably worried what kind of shit I'd pull if–

Blyad, I couldn't even think it. They were right to worry, because this world would burn, and I would burn right along with it.

A soft rustle of the sheets pulled my attention to the bed. My eyes shot up to lock on cloudy gray eyes and relief so fucking strong washed over me that I feared I'd start crying. Jesus fucking Christ! I couldn't remember the

last time I cried and at this moment I was ready to start bawling like a damn baby.

The grip on my throat stole my breath and my words. I stared at those eyes that could bring me down to my knees. She was the only one that could destroy me.

“Are you okay?” Her first words to me after being shot, her tone raspy as I drowned in the mists of those gray clouds. Or maybe I was crying. Fuck if I knew.

“Kotyonok,” I growled. “You will never do that again. Ever!” She blinked confused. “No, I’m not okay. Seeing you shot, blood all over you, it’s the worst kind of pain.” I shot to my feet and leaned over her bed, taking her face gently between my palms. “You do not take a bullet for me. I take a bullet for you.” I pushed on my chest. “Me. Never you.”

“That’s horse shit,” she croaked, scoffing softly, then winced immediately afterwards.

God, the sight of her filled me with so many feelings that I thought I was incapable of. Heavy longing. Trying to be good enough. This aching craving for her that was part of my every breath.

I was never good enough. And I was never able to save my mother. Or Mia. And I almost failed with Branka.

“I almost lost you,” I rasped, turmoil in my chest pulling me under.

She lifted her hand and pressed her palm to my cheek. “I’ll be yours, in life and death.”

An incredulous breath left me. Those were the words every man lived for.

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Chapter Sixty-Four

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BRANKA

Two weeks of Russian hospital food was enough to drive anyone to commit murder.

We were back in the car, a bulletproof Mercedes Benz SUV with an entourage of other SUVs in front and back of us.

“Did I miss something and you became the president?” I questioned Sasha, sliding him a glance across the seat.

Tatiana sat next to me, rolling her eyes vigorously. “That'd be a disaster,” she muttered. “No, my dear brother declared war on the Russian Pakhan. Vasili and Alexei, idiots that they were, stood behind him.”

“Oh.” That didn’t sound good, although it didn’t mean that much to me. “Who’s the Russian Pakhan?”

Tatiana threw me a look full of disbelief.

“Your brother sheltered you too much,” she grumbled, shaking her head. “Ilias Konstantin.”

Oh, shit. That didn’t sound good.

Especially since it was Ilias’ twin brother who had a skull full of bullets.

“We can’t talk it out?” It was a dumb question. I knew enough that talk in the underworld was pointless. She didn’t bother answering me.

I leaned back into my seat and sighed.

Alessio and Autumn went back to Canada. It was for the best since Alessio and Sasha were constantly at each other’s throats. Alessio grumbled about having a lunatic in the family. And Sasha being Sasha would come back with a snarky response. I heard him say to Alessio he would have ended him for his yapping mouth if it wasn’t for me. That he was lucky I

loved him. Like two old ladies, I swear. But the moment they noticed me, they'd quiet down and pretend they were best buddies. As if anyone would believe their act. Holidays should be a fun affair.

Killian visited me at the hospital too. It was a short visit. A tense one too. I kept apologizing and he kept telling me it wasn't necessary to apologize. I was upfront that my heart belonged to someone else. Truthfully, he didn't look shattered. Not that I expected him to be upset, but a tiny bit of disappointment would have been nice.

But then I immediately scolded myself for being selfish and having these stupid femme fatale notions.

As he headed for the exit, he paused in the doorway for a second and turned his head to narrow his eyes on Sasha. "Treat her right or I'll come after you."

"Great, another fucker concerned with my woman," I thought I heard Sasha mutter.

I grinned because I knew, without an ounce of doubt, that Sasha would always treat me right.

He loved me. He waited for me. There was nobody else for me.

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Chapter Sixty-Five

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SASHA

"It's woman for woman in our world and you know it."

Ilias didn't look heartbroken as he sat back in the chair in his office of his newly acquired building. In New fucking Orleans.

Vasili was pissed. His hair would permanently remain red at this rate.

October was wrapping up. Branka and I left Russia and were back in New Orleans, preparing for our wedding. Well, there wasn't much preparation. It'd be just family. Today. At the courthouse in front of the Justice of the Peace. And then a celebration at my brother's club.

Afterwards, we'd fly out for our honeymoon. To Russia. Who the fuck knew that my soon bride-to-be would fall in love with Russia. She stocked up our family home with everything Russian. Movies. Food. Songs. James Bond *With Love from Russia* was a must play at least once a month. We continued her, now our, Friday night movie traditions. Once a month her brother and his family joined us. Alessio grumbled about freezing his balls off while the rest of us ignored him. Children included.

All the fucked up memories were removed from our old family home. It became our primary residence and we started to make new memories. The old Russo mansion was burned to the ground. Oops, just a little accident involving matches and gasoline but it helped Branka. That was all that mattered.

New Orleans and Montréal became our second homes. We stayed at our penthouse in New Orleans when visiting and in Montréal we bought a manor neighboring Alessio's. Much to his joy. Or dismay. It was still up for debate.

That was fine with me, as long as Branka was happy. And she was. I could see it in the way her eyes shone like diamonds. It gave me a fucking hard-on every time. There was no better feeling than seeing her like that.

“Fuck woman for a woman,” I told Ilias. “Your crazy brother just about killed my wife.”

Ilias’ brow shot up. “I thought you were getting married today at the courthouse.” Fucking know-it-all motherfucker. “And then a party at the Den of Sin, nonetheless.”

He snickered at the name. It wasn’t my fault my big brother was corny and named the club after Tatiana and Isabella’s dorm room back at Georgetown.

I flipped Konstantin the bird. Of course, he would never flip one back. Fucking sophisticated ass. I guess it was unbecoming of Pakhan to give someone the middle finger.

“Back to the topic at hand,” Ilias continued, his tone almost bored. Like the biggest day of my life was a nuisance.

The fucker is probably heartbroken because he didn’t get invited, I thought smugly to myself.

“Tatiana isn’t for sale,” Vasili growled. “We don’t want trouble with you, Konstantin. But if needed, we’ll go to war. Your brother shot Branka, almost killed her.”

“And her father killed Maxim’s woman,” Ilias replied coldly. Not a single emotion passed his face. I couldn’t fucking tell whether he was grieving his twin brother or not. “Somehow the scale is tilted to Russo's favor. My brother and his woman are dead.”

“I killed the old Russo,” I told Ilias. “Take that for your payment. Eye for an eye. And be gone.”

His dark eyes flickered with something darker. Threatening. It wasn’t smart to antagonize the Pakhan, and I knew it even before I saw Vasili’s murderous expression.

But Konstantin had a reason for wanting Tatiana. It had nothing to do with obsession and love.

“Tell us why you want her,” I said. He had seen Tatiana seven years ago. Before Adrian and the clusterfuck that happened with his accident. He never showed any interest. Suddenly, it was like nobody else existed.

He sat up, signaling the meeting was over. He straightened his sleeves, his diamond cuffs catching the light shining through the windows.

“She has something that belongs to me,” he responded. “I expect your final answer by the end of today. My men will see you out.”

Well, fuck me.

HER FAMILY. Mine. Ours.

That was all we had as Branka and I walked toward the Supreme Court Building of Louisiana in the historic district. Aurora pulled some strings from her old buddies and got us in with the chief judge.

If the poor soul only knew who he was marrying.

The chatter of people, honking, music and bustle of the French Quarter was all around us but it was only a white noise in my mind. The only thing I heard were Branka’s even breaths.

She wasn’t nervous. Neither was I. This was just a formality. So the world knew who they’d fuck with if they touched her. Or even looked her way.

Branka Michelle Nikolaev.

It sounded fucking great. It sounded right.

She looked beautiful. Breathtaking. Her cheeks flushed. Her silver colored leather pants hugged her ass perfectly. Her silver Chanel shirt breathed elegance into her outfit, but it was the red heels she wore that finished her outfit.

She looked like a Nikolaev. Like my woman.

My gaze flickered down to our interlocked fingers. My ink stark against her pale skin. The symbols on my fingers used to be a reminder of my mother’s last words. Now they were a reminder of Branka.

Her strength. Her survival. Her soft heart.

She was born for me, just as I was born for her.

The ceremony was short. I had no fucking clue what words were spoken. The only ones I heard were the ones Branka had given me. Her vows of love, trust, and devotion. She knew she had mine.

After all, she was my obsession. Part of my every breath.

I slid the ring onto her finger and her soft gasp reached my ears. It was a simple yellow gold band with an engraving. *Moye Serdtse.*

“Because you’ve been my heart all along,” I said, meeting her gaze.

Her delicate neck moved as she swallowed, then took my hand and slid the ring onto my finger. I let out a noise of amusement while my chest tightened. She was the only woman who could do that to me.

“And because you’re mine,” she murmured.

Her ring had the same engraving. *Moye Serdtse*. It was what started our story.

“Great minds,” I muttered.

“Or crazy,” she mused. “But as long as we’re together, it doesn’t really matter.”

She was fucking right about that.

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Chapter Sixty-Six

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BRANKA

I was Mrs. Sasha Nikolaev.

Outside, the sun shone bright. October in New Orleans was like being in the Bahamas. At least when comparing it to the temperatures we'd had in Russia for the past few months.

"My little baby sister isn't so little anymore," Alessio drawled then pulled me into a hug. I might have glimpsed some tears in his eyes. And my brother never cried. I smiled with my own tears glistening in my eyes. Happy tears.

"I love you, brother," I choked out.

He pressed a kiss to my forehead.

"And I love you, baby sister," he rasped. "Mia would have been happy to see you today."

A lump in my throat grew. So many emotions. Happiness. Love.

A promise of a beautiful future.

I nodded. Autumn nudged him. Their little daughter slept soundly in my best friend's arms. Just as she was about to hug me, Kol shoved his little body in between us and wrapped his arms around me.

"I love you, Aunt Branka," he said, burying his face into my stomach. "I don't want you to live away from me. Tell Sasha to let you come live with me."

A round of laughter rang out around us.

"I love you too, buddy." I ruffled his hair softly. "Sasha and I will visit you all the time. And you can visit us. Anytime. You just call me. Okay?"

He nodded seriously and I knew without a doubt Kol would spend a lot of time with us in Russia.

“Can Mommy hug Aunt Branka now?” Autumn asked amused. Kol was still between us and she leaned over, then pressed a kiss on my cheek. “I’m so happy for you, bestie.” She flicked a glance to Sasha who stood next to me, his own brothers teasing him. Apparently it was payback time. “Sasha kidnapping you was the best thing that has happened to you. You’re glowing. Wait until you see the photos I snapped.”

I was so lost in Sasha and our vows, I hadn’t even noticed she snapped pictures.

“Of course it was the best thing that happened to her,” Sasha chimed in. “I know what I’m doing.”

Everyone rolled their eyes, except for me. Sasha saved me. Multiple times. While Killian wouldn’t have made my life hell, he wouldn’t have made me happy. Even worse, I wouldn’t have made him happy.

The next ten minutes everyone hugged us and wished us many years of love and happiness. It was our own happily-ever-after. Seven years in the works.

And every single day of waiting was worth it.

Once everyone left, Sasha and I stood in the middle of the sidewalk. My heart patted with happiness and pinged off the walls of my chest. My hands shook slightly as I put my palm on his chest. He wore black leather pants and a silky black shirt, highlighting his light hair and eyes even more.

Satan’s spawn became my angel.

“Do you want to ditch The Den of Sin reception with family and friends, Mrs. Nikolaev?” he drawled, that irresistible smirk on his face tempting me. I leaned over and kissed him. I loved kissing him. I loved feeling his hard body against my soft one.

I loved *him*. Period.

“We better not,” I murmured. “They are already accusing us of being reclusive and hiding in Siberia.”

His thumb swept over my bottom lip, the love in his eyes leaving me feeling raw.

“Are you happy?”

He asked me that often. As if he worried whether he was worthy.

I nodded. “*So* happy.” I parted my lips and my tongue darted to brush over the tip of his thumb. “*You* make me so happy.”

His arm came around my waist and pulled me closer. “I love you, kotyonok.”

God, he was so much more than that psychotic mobster I thought him to be. “I love you too, husband.”

A smile pulled on his lips. His eyes ignited with a spark.

“I love that title.” His voice was coarse, then he kissed me. Soft and slow, yet deep enough to rattle my soul. “You make *me* happy, kotyonok,” he rasped against my lips.

God, life was unexpected. So much heartbreak and so many ghosts got us here, but none of them mattered. Our parents lost their grip on our souls. I wasn’t sure how the rest of our lives would play out, but I knew one thing for sure.

We’d do it together. With love.

He brushed his nose against mine.

“Are you in the mood for one stop before our party?” he asked.

I lifted my eyebrows curiously but he didn’t elaborate. “Sure.”

Handing me his motorcycle helmet, I took it with a sigh. “My hair will be messed up.”

Sasha’s gaze flickered with amusement. “My wife’s safety comes first.”

Twenty minutes later, we were in a tattoo parlor. The sound of the constant hum of the machine buzzed through the air. And I bawled like a baby.

My initials, B.M.N., were well underway of being inked into my husband’s chest, right above his heart.

For the tenth time, I repeated softly, “You don’t have to do this.” I

I tasted the salt on my lips, my cheeks wet. This man was too much. Everything I needed and didn’t know.

“This is the last tattoo,” he said, holding my hand. It was the only thing he asked of me. To hold his hand as my initials were being carved, rather tattooed, into his chest. “The happy ending to my story. Our story.”

My eyes roamed over his chest, a carpet of tattoos marking his skin. The story of his life.

It turned out, I carved my initials into Sasha Nikolaev after all.

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EPILOGUE

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Branka - Three Years Later

Sasha's hand held my throat, our eyes locked in the reflection of the mirror. His inked fingers against my pale skin. Me at his complete mercy. My body blindly in his grasp.

His front pressed against my back and his cock buried deep inside me, I panted as he thrust in and out of me, my insides clenching around his shaft.

"Who's an old man?" he growled in my ear. His thrusts were relentless, deep and hard. When I didn't answer, that earned me a spanking. His thrust and spank against my ass cheeks were coordinated, enhancing my pleasure.

A few more swats. My ass burned. My thighs dripped with my juices. The pleasure built. The reflection staring back at me was a mess. My mouth was parted, my hair wild and sweaty, my eyes glazed with lust.

"Who?" he demanded. "Who's an old man?"

Yeah, calling Sasha Nikolaev an old man was a mistake but such a delicious mistake. I didn't fucking regret it. He was wringing the third orgasm out of me. My insides quivered, my pussy clenched greedily, milking him for all he would give me.

"You," I panted, grinding myself against him. Another spank on my ass. "But you're *my* old man."

That earned me a few more swats and I came all over him, my juices glistening on my thighs. My legs quivered and Sasha's hand slid from my hips to wrap around me and hold me up.

Sasha turned out to be the best thing that could have happened to me.

My Satan's spawn. My love. My everything.

"Happy anniversary, kotyonok," he murmured, nipping softly at my earlobe. "I love you."

My tongue darted out, swiping across my lips. My heart thundered excitedly. My pulse raced and it had nothing to do with what we had just done. And everything to do with what I was about to say.

“And I love you,” I murmured, slowly turning around in his arms so I’d face him. I took a deep breath in and then exhaled. “I don’t have a gift for you.”

“You are my gift,” he rasped, nuzzling his face into me. “The only gift I want.”

I swallowed.

“What about a baby?” He stilled, his pale blue eyes searching my face. “You said once we could adopt. I- I think I’m ready if your offer still stands.” He opened his mouth, then closed it. It was rare to see Sasha Nikolaev at a loss for words. “He or she won’t have your blonde hair or your eyes,” I croaked.

He cupped my face, pulling me closer and our noses brushing together.

“But he or she will have our heart. Our name. Our love. That is all that matters. He or she will be family. Just as much a Nikolaev as anyone else.”

He picked me up and I squealed as he walked us over to the bed.

“You, me, and our babies,” he murmured against my lips. “We’ll bring the world down.”

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PREVIEW OF BELLES & MOBSTERS: LUCA

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Luca

My eyes found her immediately.

There was a breathless moment when my heart stopped beating. It *confused* me. She was the only woman that ever stirred this reaction. This *ache* in my heart.

Margaret Callahan was a force to be reckoned with. Those wild jet black curls that cascaded down her back like a thick curtain. The stubborn curls that framed her face, that ivory skin begging to be kissed.

Fuck, I had to get myself together around this woman.

She had to be my lesson in life.

My humility. My temptress. My torture.

She'd end up being the death of me. From the moment I first saw her, I hadn't been able to forget her. I wasn't sure whether that night in Temptation, Cassio's club in New York City, kicked off my own temptation or my own demise. Ironically, she wore a costume that night too. A black widow costume that hugged her curves and made men drool. Cassio's event manager should have been killed when he thought of that idea - a Halloween party in August.

I was pretty sure that costume had done me in.

God, why her?

I wondered the same goddamned thing from the moment I laid eyes on her. Women threw themselves at my feet. Begged me to give relationships a try. Promised they wouldn't lay any demands on me because they knew it would be futile to try.

Not Margaret Callahan.

She just flat out rejected me before I even had time to formulate a fucking sentence. Not once but twice. Like a puppy chasing a bone, I came back for a third. Maybe she was my payback for never sleeping with a woman twice.

My eyes traveled over her petite figure. I wasn't the only one gawking. Quite a few men were eyeing her with hunger in their eyes.

She wore a wine-red elaborate gown with a sweetheart neckline that dipped low. Too low for my sanity. The satin bodice was black and clung to her waist in a corset style. But from the waist down, it flared in an elaborate design with multiple layers of tulle.

The mask she wore hid her face well. A custom-made lace mask. One side of her face was completely covered with the exception of her mouth. The other half of her face revealed her beautiful jaw. Nobody would have recognized her. But I wasn't just anyone. I'd recognize her anywhere. Her scent. Her smile. Her eyes.

She was too far away to see their color, but I knew they were the deepest crystal blue of the Caribbean sea. The kind that could break your heart by just watching her.

Whispers filled the air. Men descended on her like vultures. She barely spared them a glance. Margaret was a flirt, but she liked a certain type. I was nothing like that type. She seemed to go for corporate type men. Clean cut.

But that wouldn't deter me from winning her over.

She was the one woman that would cause me to break my rule about sleeping with the same woman twice.

Drifting through the ballroom, her eyes kept darting left and right. Up and down. The chandelier had her choker necklace glimmering and catching everyone's eyes. She roamed the room slowly; the waiter passing with a tray paused to offer her a flute of champagne.

She offered him an absentminded smile, took a drink, and continued. Until her eyes landed on me.

Her steps faltered and she stood still.

She couldn't have recognized me. I had a *Phantom of the Opera* gold and black mask and half of my face was completely covered, leaving my lips and the left side of the face and jaw open.

A half-smile pulled on my lips. It was as if we coordinated.

She resumed walking, slowly but in my direction. I didn't move. As my eyes locked on her, I waited.

If there was one thing I learned about Margaret Callahan, it was that she loved the chase. So maybe I'd let her chase me for a change.

It would be beneficial if my dick cooperated.

Like some kind of fucking teenage boy, my heart thundered against my chest harder with each step she took my way. Until she came to stand in front of me.

"Hello." Fuck, her voice was made for phone sex, sultry, suggestive, with a hint of amusement.

Jesus, if I could find one fucking thing, only one, that I disliked, maybe I'd get over this fascination with her.

"Want to have sex?"

Years! Years of chasing her and obsessing over the raven haired beauty, but all it took was a masquerade ball to have her in my bed.

"Moving fast…" I paused, cutting myself short. "Aren't we?" The last two times I saw her, I gave her a nickname. *Bella.* She was so fucking beautiful, it was impossible not to notice it.

Her eyes flashed with mischief, and it had been that spark that had captured my attention the first time we ran into each other. This woman would have been an Irish rebel if given the opportunity.

"We could talk for a while, if you want," she said nonchalantly. "You know, if you need a warm up. But I don't want to waste my time if you are not interested in sex."

Jesus fucking Christ!

Was she adamant about getting in trouble? Cassio wanted to set her up so he'd get to marry her cousin, but the girl had her own plans.

I took her hand into mine and dragged her out of the ballroom and up the stairs until we were at the top floor. I had booked the penthouse suite of this hotel for the trap. Except it wasn't supposed to be with me. My brother, Cassio, wanted me to find her old boyfriend. Yeah, fuck that. I never had any intentions of finding anyone to seduce her.

I had a plan of my own. My brother was crazy if he thought I'd let anyone have this woman.

Once the door slammed behind us, I locked it and kept my stare firmly fixed on her. I didn't know what to expect from her tonight. Okay, maybe I

had an idea but it fucking pissed me off that she had a plan of her own. To fuck another man. Just anyone.

“Get undressed,” I ordered, my voice raspy.

“What–”

I took her chin between my fingers and had her look at me. Fuck, those blue eyes. They were my vice.

“You want to be fucked,” I rasped. “So let’s do it.”

Her eyes widened behind the mask. “Seriously?”

“Get undressed, temptress.”

Her hand came to rest over her chest, her breath hitching.

Her fingers trembled as she reached for the lace of her bodice. Her movements were slow, her eyes on me. Once the laces came undone, she lowered the top and her gorgeous breasts spilled out.

She didn’t wear a bra. Goddamn it!

Her chest heaved with shuddering breaths, tempting me further. She dropped her dress and it pooled at her feet, leaving her standing in cherry red pumps and silk panties.

My dick twitched, hardening at the sight of her. Jesus Christ. She was like a Madonna in one of those paintings my grandfather liked to collect.

“Your turn,” she breathed. I arched an eyebrow at her request. It was another thing I loved about this woman. She was so fucking demanding. Maddening. My mind blanked. It fucking blanked at the sight of her naked body. She was gorgeous. From her graceful neck, to her generous tits, her soft hips down to her toned legs.

I shedded the suit jacket, then unbuttoned my black dress shirt, and all the while my eyes were zeroed in on her. Her skin was flushed. That pale Irish skin marred with a blush everywhere I could see.

Her gaze was zeroed in on me as I discarded my shirt next. My shoes and socks followed, then my pants. She shimmied out of her panties, watching me.

“The masks stay on,” she murmured as I discarded my boxers.

“Your heels stay on,” I demanded, my voice hoarse.

When she didn’t answer, I sought out her eyes and found them zeroed in on my cock.

“W-what’s that?” she asked, her tongue sweeping over her bottom lip.

I wrapped my hand around my shaft and stroked it once. Her mouth parted, her eyes half-lidded and her blush deepening.

“This?” I asked, sweeping my thumb over the Prince Albert piercing. “It’s a piercing.”

She breathed heavily and I half expected her to either run or pass out.

“You’re huge,” she whispered. “Why do you have a piercing too?”

Her hand reached out and instantly my hard cock twitched, eager for her touch. But then as if she remembered she shouldn’t, her hand fell down her body. It didn’t escape me how she rubbed her thighs together, the glistening juices smearing on her inner thighs.

“It feels good against your clit, and when I’m inside you, against your G-spot.” I rubbed my cock, the piercing moving.

“Oh my God,” she gulped. “Are you serious?”

I nodded, pre-cum already glistening at the tip of my cock. If she decided this wasn’t for her, I’d fucking die. My cock pulsed and I fisted myself, squeezing my erection from the tip to the base.

“You ready to test it?” I challenged.

She bit her lip, not moving. I waited. It had to be consensual. She had to want it as much as I did.

“Yeah,” she finally answered.

Thank fuck.

I took her hand and took her to bed. The moment the back of her knees hit the mattress, she wrapped her hands around my neck and kissed me. Our mouths connected and a shudder rolled down my spine.

Fuck!

She tasted good. Like strawberries. My tongue slid between her lips and I owned her mouth, kissing her hard. Her one hand trailed down my chest, then lowered until her dainty fingers wrapped around my hard cock.

Both of us fell back, the mattress bouncing our bodies and dipping under our weight.

My body atop of hers, I rubbed my shaft against her wet folds and her back arched.

“Jesus, I can feel the cold metal,” she panted.

I pushed inside her in one forceful thrust and wedged myself deep in her. She let out a choked cry and her body spasmed.

“Holy fuck,” I hissed. She was tight as a fist and her core pulsated around my length. She took all of me, stretching tight around my erection. This was heaven. This was hell.

I knew I’d need it for the rest of my life.

I pulled out, almost completely, leaving only the tip inside her before slamming back into her tight pussy. Her body trembled, goosebumps peppered her skin and she whimpered.

"*Oh. My. God.*" Her moans were fucking music.

I rucked my hips, my cock sliding in and out of her cunt, her juices smearing all over it. Her eyes lowered, watching my shaft disappear into her pussy, and I thought she loved the sight. Hovering above her, my pubic bone ground against her clit.

The noises she made had me almost blowing my load right there and then.

"Your pussy is taking me so well," I praised.

Her eyelids fluttered shut. "Yes," she moaned. Her fingers clawed at my back as I pumped into her again and again. Each thrust harder and deeper than the one before. The wet sounds of our bodies, flesh against flesh, our moans and grunts filled the room and bounced off the walls.

"God. Please," she screamed.

I fucked her. Fast. Hard. Pounding furiously into her.

Her legs, heels still on, wrapped around my waist, her fingers at my back, my body against hers as I thrust into her. Her pussy clenched around me. Her moans and words urged me on. Her wetness, hot and sticky, dripped all over our bodies.

With a grunt, I drove into her hard. Mercilessly. The tip of my cock and the piercing brushing against her womb. She shuddered and quivered. A rush of wetness and her insides clenched around my cock. She whimpered, moans spilling from her lips, as she reached her orgasm.

I came the hardest I ever had, my seed pouring into her. My heart pounded in my ears. I shuddered as my own orgasm rattled through me. And I swore I saw lightning behind my eyelids.

I pulled out and she gasped, almost painfully.

The haze of pleasure slowly dissipated and my eyes lowered to where our bodies were joined mere seconds ago.

The sight of my seed and… blood smeared all over my cock and her inner thighs.

Margaret Callahan was a virgin? What the fuck!

TO BE CONTINUED

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XOXO

Eva Winners

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